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# Photo finish: the memorialization of death through photography in nineteenth-century America

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Photo finish:  
The memorialization of death through  
photography in nineteenth-century  
America

by

Cynthia Denise Potter

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of  
Cynthia Denise Potter  
has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy

## DEDICATION

*For MaryBeth...for all the ways thoughts of you kept me strong, we share this.*



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## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

When someone we care about dies, we seek comfort in our memories of him or her. Photographs help us recall the life of a person and, when they begin to fade from our memory, the very features of the absent face. We take the self-image for granted. We are so steeped in photographic images—our own and those of others—that we cannot block those representations from our minds. There was a time, however, when most people knew their own image only as it might be reflected in water. Mirrors were a rare luxury. With time, glass became common in business buildings and homes, and people caught more frequent, but fleeting, glimpses of their own forms. Not until 1839, when a practical method of photography was invented, did people gain access to permanent, *accurate* representations of their physical being. Since then, the ever-present camera and photograph have contributed immeasurably to our view of ourselves.

There have always been attempts to record and preserve the human image. Throughout history drawings, carvings, death masks, busts, and paintings were all employed at various times to capture the human form, and the unique aspects of individuals. These methods, however, were subject to the interpretations and talents of the artist rendering the likeness. In addition, the social climate and artistic community influenced the depictions, no matter how well-intentioned or determined the artist was to be true to his subject. With the development of photography, however, it was possible to obtain a more realistic image. While photography does reflect a certain amount of artistic vision on the part of the photographer, there is also an undeniable truth to a photograph, a presentation of existence.

Never is that more true than in the postmortem photograph where death is somehow captured by technology and given center stage. By considering the advent and introduction of

photography, and how it intersected with Victorian attitudes regarding death and the afterlife, we can gain a better understanding of the practice. Ultimately, we arrive at the paradox that postmortem photography represents. On the one hand, photography was part of everyday life for Victorians, and taking pictures of their daily lives was natural and common. On the other hand, turning to photography as a means of forestalling the finality of death was an extreme response, a desperate act. What exists is a contradiction that is both emotionally compelling, and indicative of the magnitude of the innovations in nineteenth-century life. Technology made what had been impossible commonplace, and accessing technology for postmortem photography placed Victorians in the position of adapting what had become an accepted technology for recording life as a means of dealing with death.

That probably seems strange in our modern, urban, service and information-oriented society where the average person is far removed from the flow of the life cycle, which includes death. Just as we no longer plant and harvest our own crops, or slaughter the animals we have raised for our own food, we no longer confront, on a regular basis, the beginning and ending of human life. In the nineteenth century it was rare for a person or family not to have lost someone close to them. In fact, usually several losses occurred, and often within a short time of each other. Family members were present at the beginning of life, during the birth process, and present at the death and preparation of the body for burial. Our isolation from these practices makes it difficult for us to understand, let alone value, the thoughts and actions of people for whom death was a much more constant companion.

When photography became available and acceptable to people to record the events of their lives, in the mid-1800s, those events included the preparing of bodies for burial, laying them out at home, and often participating in the actual burial. Faced with the prospect of

never seeing the face of a loved one again, particularly if no photographs had been taken during life, the only option remaining—a photograph taken after death—was not abhorrent to many people. It was a means to capture the image of the loved one, perhaps exchanging the harsh reality of a lingering death or tragic accident for a more peaceful memory, a loved one in repose, perhaps appearing to sleep. In the mid-1800s, the technology of photography was still new and every new photograph was unique.

To understand the existence and purpose of postmortem photography it is useful to examine the era when photography became not only possible but a passion for many, to consider the needs of the grieving when they chose the option of contracting a photographer upon the death of a loved one, and the motives and desires of the photographers themselves. When those many factors are evaluated as best possible from this distance, we may gain a reasonable, if uneasy, appreciation for the intent and circumstances of Victorian Americans when they chose to photograph their deceased loved one. There is something familiar about even 150-year-old photographs. We may not be cast in bronze, or captured on an artist's canvas, but we have been photographed, and therefore we have something in common with the subjects of postmortem photography.

This thesis begins with a review of the secondary sources pertaining to Victorian life, attitudes toward death in the nineteenth century, photography in general, and postmortem photography specifically. Photographs are considered as primary sources, and their strengths and limitations discussed. A brief overview of Victorian attitudes toward life and death is followed by an examination of the innovation and availability of photography. A chapter is devoted to the practice and challenges of interpreting photographs, followed by a discussion of postmortem photography specifically. The changes in the practice and prevailing attitudes

as the century drew to a close concludes this work. An appendix of representative photographs is included, and meant to furnish a sample of the kind of photographs taken, as well as to illustrate the limited identification generally possible.

## CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Any review of literature concerning postmortem photography must begin with the understanding that the most compelling and revealing primary sources are not written works regarding the subject, but the photographs themselves. Unfortunately, the photographs represent the best and worst in source material. Photographs from the 1800s are treasures of insight into the attitudes, values, and realities of Victorian life. At the same time, these artifacts are unbelievably frustrating for their lack of concrete information, in most cases. There is an abundance of photographs from the mid-1800s on, representing all aspects of life, from everyday activities to special events. A far fewer number are postmortem photographs. Unfortunately, most photographs are undated, provide no names or locations, and rarely include information explaining the motivation for their taking. This leaves tremendous room for speculation and interpretation—or misinterpretation.

We must tread carefully anytime we attempt to assign motive or intent to actors in the past, even when there is some documented evidence of how they may have thought or felt. And there is a particular obligation to withhold either our sense of empathy or outrage—from our particularly presentist point of view—when dealing with a subject as potentially emotional and psychically disturbing as postmortem photography. It is impossible to divorce ourselves completely from our emotions when we consider this material. We are human, allowing us to empathize with the losses associated with death. We have been photographed, held cameras, taken pictures. We have lost people we love to death. Because of these experiences and emotions, we must enter the arena of consideration and examination of the practice of taking postmortem photographs aware of our own biases, fear, revulsion, compassion, confusion, sadness—of our humanity. We cannot achieve objectivity or

significant distance from this subject. Instead, we must strive for an awareness of our subjectivity and attempt to step back, however slightly, from our discomfort. We must allow the material to serve as a view, a window, on how people at a certain point in time met and processed their own reality, in this case their mortality, a reality we share with them.

The secondary sources of material on postmortem photography are very limited, presumably because of the limitations already discussed. It does not matter how many photographs one has if no or few concrete observations can be made and supported. In her article, “‘The Visage Once So Dear’: Interpreting Memorial Photographs,” Deborah A. Smith provides a strong overview of the practice of postmortem photography.<sup>1</sup> She supplements information about the general context of the time period and attitudes with bookkeeping records from photographers of the time, which show charges for various services. Another valuable source of information is Nancy M. West’s “Camera Fiends: Early Photography, Death, and the Supernatural.”<sup>2</sup> Her research of Victorian attitudes toward death and photography includes a discussion of the vocabulary that evolved relating to the technology. She focuses largely on the supernatural and superstitious elements of spirit photography, an interesting aspect and application of the technology, though not particularly useful to this study.

Of limited value for critical study, but still interesting, is *The Waking Dream: Photography’s First Century*, by Maria Morris Hamburg et al.<sup>3</sup> The postmortem image included is described and interpreted from an artistic point of view, valuable for

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<sup>1</sup> Deborah A. Smith, “‘The Visage Once So Dear’: Interpreting Memorial Photographs,” *Dublin Seminar For New England FolkLife, Annual Proceedings* 19 (1994), pp. 255-68.

<sup>2</sup> Nancy M. West, “Camera Fiends: Early Photography, Death, and the Supernatural,” *Centennial Review* 40, no. 1 (Winter 1996), pp. 171-206.

<sup>3</sup> Maria Morris Hambourg, et al, *The Waking Dream: Photography’s First Century*, New York: Harvey N. Abrams, Inc., 1993.

understanding how a photograph might be fleshed out, but also illustrating how easy it may be to embellish or romanticize the subjects in a photograph. More of a curiosity and cult favorite is Michael Lesy's *Wisconsin Death Trip*.<sup>4</sup> The book is a collection of photographs, many of which are postmortem in nature, bits of gossip, and excerpts from local newspapers. Particular focus is on the most gruesome accounts of death and reaction to it, making this a work that largely contributes to the sensationalism and macabre fascination that sometimes accompanies these photographs.

Two sources stand out as providing both a good discussion of the circumstances of postmortem photography, and showing a significant number of photographs to illustrate and support the assertions of the text. *Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America* by Jay Ruby is a rich source of information on the customs and habits of Victorian Americans relating to mourning and grief.<sup>5</sup> Ruby also includes excerpts from photography trade journals, demonstrating the exchange of ideas and information within the business community, and the generally accepted nature of the vocation of photographing the dead. Another excellent source of information is *Sleeping Beauty: Memorial Photography in America* by Stanley B. Burns.<sup>6</sup> A medical doctor who has accumulated a large collection of postmortem photographs, Burns is able to provide informed opinions as to the nature of the death of the subjects in the photographs. His greatest contribution may be a detailed chronology of death in America, thereby creating a timeline of developments affecting, and reflected in, American culture.

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Lesy, *Wisconsin Death Trip*, New York: Doubleday, 1973.

<sup>5</sup> Jay Ruby, *Secure the Shadow*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995.

<sup>6</sup> Stanley B. Burns, *Sleeping Beauty: Memorial Photography in America*, Twelvetees Press, 1990.



Because of the limited amount of material dealing specifically with postmortem photography, it is helpful to expand the material considered into other areas that can also shed light on the practice. One valuable area is that of interpreting photographs in general. In *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans*, Alan Trachtenberg provides an excellent description of the ambivalence many people felt toward photography because of its “magical, supernatural qualities that hinted at the occult.”<sup>7</sup> He situates photography within the culture and attitudes of the time, making the connection to other seemingly magical technologies of the time, such as the telegraph, steam power, and trains. He examines, in depth, Mathew Brady’s Civil War photographic expeditions, as well as the work of other photographers. From this we gain an appreciation for the contributions of photography in a comprehensive sense.

John R. Whiting’s *Photography is a Language* traces developments in photography and discusses how the changes were reflected in actual practice.<sup>8</sup> He considers the many aspects of photography that influence the final product, such as focusing, lighting, composition, and subject matter. Whiting also discusses the evolution of photographs into print material, and what editors looked for as they considered print and photographic material, what would appeal to readers.

Particularly useful is “‘Doing the Rest’: The Uses of Photographs in American Studies,” by Marsha Peters and Bernard Mergen.<sup>9</sup> Their focus is demonstrating how photographs differ from the written word in communicating information. They believe

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<sup>7</sup> Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans*, U.S.: Hill and Wang, 1989.

<sup>8</sup> John R. Whiting, *Photography is a Language*, Chicago: Ziff Davis, 1946.

<sup>9</sup> Marsha Peters and Bernard Mergen, “‘Doing the Rest’: The Uses of Photographs in American Studies,” *American Quarterly* 29, no. 3(1997), pp. 280-303.

photographs have been neglected as historical documents and cultural markers, and that no satisfying model for analyzing photographs has ever been developed. They contend that photography has three distinct roles: as entertainment, as communication, and as a record of the physical and social landscape.

While the interpretation of photographs is important to consider, it is also helpful to understand the origins of photography and cameras in general. In *The Victorians: Photographic Portraits*, Audrey Linkman discusses the psychological aspects of photography, the efforts and intent of photographers to achieve social respect by linking themselves to portrait artists.<sup>10</sup> She gives a detailed look at the photographic “sitting,” and the dynamics at work as both the photographer and the subject attempted to achieve the most satisfying image. She discusses postmortem photography briefly, and the likelihood that many photographs were likely destroyed as later generations became less accustomed to, or comfortable with, the practice. John Stauffer also examines the emotional and psychological aspects of photography in “Daguerreotyping the National Soul: The Portraits of Southworth and Hawes, 1843-1860,” and discusses the concerns that many Victorians had about photography’s ability to capture the soul or reveal too much of the inner nature of a person.<sup>11</sup>

Two works focus on the Kodak Company and its influence on society and culture, as the ability to take photographs shifted from the strictly professional realm to the amateur photographer and average person. While not particularly applicable to this study, these works still contribute to the overall understanding of the importance of photography. “Kodakers Lying in Wait’: Amateur Photography and the Right of Privacy in New York, 1885-1915,”

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<sup>10</sup> Audrey Linkman, *The Victorians: Photographic Portraits*, New York: Tauris Parke Books, 1993.

<sup>11</sup> John Stauffer, “Daguerreotyping the National Soul: The Portraits of Southworth and Hawes, 1843-1860,” *Prospects* 22 (1997), pp. 69-107.

by Robert E. Mensel examines the impact of photography on individual privacy and sense of personal boundaries.<sup>12</sup> Also interesting is Nancy M. West's recent work, *Kodak And the Lens of Nostalgia*.<sup>13</sup> She has thoroughly researched Kodak's corporate archives to reveal marketing strategies, advertising ploys, and the aborted "death campaign" of the early 1930s, when Kodak intended to market amateur photography as a means of dealing with grief through the taking of pictures of the deceased and funerals. West does an excellent job of tracing photography's transformation from a formal, professional activity to a means of preserving and collecting bits of everyday life for the common person.

None of the discussion of postmortem photography in the nineteenth-century has significance, however, without an adequate understanding of the atmosphere of the time. A general "slice of life" appreciation of the influences on Victorian Americans is possible through works such as Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.<sup>14</sup> Glenway Wescott's novel, *The Grandmothers: A Family Portrait*, is an interesting, if somewhat depressing, saga of one family's experiences with life and death in the Midwest.<sup>15</sup> *A Tribute of Flowers to the Memory of Mother*, by D. H. Wever, is a collection of romantic and emotional poems and essays dedicated to the love and memory of mothers, and is a good example of the florid and effusive literature that was found in many Victorian homes.<sup>16</sup> It is also valuable to examine collections of

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<sup>12</sup> Robert E. Mensel, "'Kodakers Lying in Wait': Amateur Photography in New York, 1885-1915," *American Quarterly* 43, no.1 (March 1991), pp. 24-45.

<sup>13</sup> Nancy Martha West, *Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia*, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000.

<sup>14</sup> Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, New York: Dover, 1994; Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin or Life Among the Lowly*, New York: Penguin, 1986.

<sup>15</sup> Glenway Wescott, *The Grandmothers: A Family Portrait*, n.p.: Grosset & Dunlap, 1927.

<sup>16</sup> D. H. Wever, *A Tribute of Flowers to the Memory of Mother*, Chicago: Wever & Co., 1890.

correspondence from the time period. *How They Said It: Wise and Witty Letters from the Famous and Infamous*, by Rosalie Maggio, contains pieces of correspondence that provide a glimpse into the nature of interactions through condolence letters.<sup>17</sup>

Condolence literature was a significant presence in Victorian life as women writers and ministers turned out sentimental and melodramatic stories of lost love, heavenly afterlife, and the enduring bond between those who had died, and their grieving loved ones. Two books by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps demonstrate well the consolation genre; *The Gates Ajar* and *Chapters From a Life*.<sup>18</sup> Dominic Ricciotti's article, "Popular Art in *Godey's Lady's Book*: An Image of the American Woman, 1830-1860," is a good overview of the images, attitudes, and messages women incorporated into their views of appropriate dress, manners, and expressions of appropriate emotion.<sup>19</sup>

Two sources provide details on prescribed mourning customs and rituals. *Death in the Victorian Family* by Pat Jalland is a comprehensive look at the customs and attitudes surrounding death and mourning during the 1800s, and examines Britain's influence on American practices.<sup>20</sup> Ann Masson and Bryce Reveley provide an in-depth look at painted mourning portraits in "When Life's Brief Sun Was Set: Portraits of Southern Women in Mourning."<sup>21</sup> They provide detailed information about the prescribed mourning periods, rules

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<sup>17</sup> Rosalie Maggio, *How They Said It: Wise and Witty Letters from the Famous and Infamous*, Paramus: Prentice Hall, 2000.

<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *The Gates Ajar*, Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1964; Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *Chapters From a Life*, Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1896.

<sup>19</sup> Dominic Ricciotti, "Popular Art in *Godey's Lady's Book*: An Image of the American Woman, 1830-1860," *Historical New Hampshire* 27, no. 1(1972), pp. 3-26.

<sup>20</sup> Pat Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996.

<sup>21</sup> Ann Masson and Bryce Reveley, "When Life's Brief Sun Was Set: Portraits of Southern Women in Mourning, 1830-1860," *Southern Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (1988), pp. 32-56.

of dress, proper behavior, and activities for the grieving, and related areas such as hair wreaths and mourning jewelry.

A particularly valuable article is Marilyn F. Motz's "Visual Autobiography: Photography Albums of Turn-of-the-Century Midwestern Women."<sup>22</sup> Motz explores the albums that became status symbols and statements in Victorian homes, for photographs of everyday life events as well as for postmortem subjects. Her discussion includes a consideration regarding the limitations of photographs as primary sources, and of the sense of awareness and value one must place on her or his own life to have and save photographs, an awareness largely created and supported by the emerging physical self-image associated with photographs.

A final work deserving mention is Viviana A. Zelizer's *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children*.<sup>23</sup> This work examines changes in the value placed on children that occurred during the mid-1800s, which contributed, to a greater emotional investment placed in those children. Zelizer pursues the idea that as children became less economically valuable, that is that as they contributed less in the nature of work income, they became more emotionally valuable, thereby contributing to the desire to focus attention on them both in life and death.

While all of these works contribute to our understanding of the time period, or photography in general, and a few even focus on postmortem photography specifically, what would be most useful would be a study that gathers the records of nineteenth-century photographers in a comprehensive way. It would be valuable to see photographers' activities,

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<sup>22</sup> Marilyn F. Motz, "Visual Autobiography: Photograph Albums of Turn-of-the-Century Midwestern Women," *American Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (March 1989), pp. 63-92.

<sup>23</sup> Viviana A. Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985.

sittings, and charges in various parts of the country. They might contain the largely absent information—that regarding how the practice of postmortem photography occurred along ethnic or racial lines. They may also house the records of various religious attitudes as photographers accommodated different faith practices and values. These records, combined with information from photography trade journals, would provide a fuller understanding of the supply side of the postmortem photography equation. The demand side might be better explained through an examination of diaries and letters where the thoughts and feelings of those desiring or hiring photographers for the purpose might be expressed. The photographs seem to say so much, yet without factual information we cannot be sure if it is the photographs we are hearing or our own thoughts.

### CHAPTER 3. VICTORIAN LIFE AND DEATH

To understand what motivated Victorian Americans to photograph their dead, it is necessary to understand the many influences that affected how nineteenth-century Americans viewed life and its relationship to death. By 1800, the Romantic Movement, with its emphasis on imagination, emotion, and transcendentalism had spread to America from Europe. John Morley refers to it as a “congealed romanticism that encapsuled Victorian family life, that produced the keepsake and sentimental ballad, and that effloresced in the Valentine,” and makes the point that those same influences found “reverse expression in objects, poems, ceremonies, and clothes in remembrance of the defunct.”<sup>1</sup> The cluttered mantles, tables, and cabinets of Victorians held mementos of life and death in close proximity, reflecting how entwined the two were for them.

Literature was a dramatic and constant presence in the lives of Victorians, helping to create, then reflect, people’s attitudes towards death. In England, Charles Dickens wrote evocative and emotional stories with dramatic death scenes and elaborate funerals that were familiar to Americans. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, by Harriet Beecher Stowe, was first published in 1852, and contains the now famous deathbed scene of little Eva. Before dying she calls her family, friends, and servants to her side so she can distribute her golden curls to them as a remembrance of her. She speaks of “going to a better country,” and exclaims “O! love—joy—peace!” and then expires.<sup>2</sup>

Mark Twain published *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in 1885, with its story of the deceased 15-year-old Emmeline, who spent her time making drawings of women mourning

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<sup>1</sup> John Morley, *Death, Heaven and the Victorians*, n.p.: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1971, p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin or Life Among the Lowly*, New York: Penguin, 1986, pp. 416, 418.

at tombstones and crying into handkerchiefs, cutting obituaries, accident reports, and stories of suffering from the local paper, and always being the first one to arrive at a home where someone had died.<sup>3</sup> Large and ornately decorated books of poetry and essays added to the oftentimes melodramatic atmosphere. D. H. Wever's collection entitled *A Tribute of Flowers to the Memory of Mother*, contains separate sections on Mother as she's dying, after Mother dies, and Mother's grave. The selections are dramatic and emotional, and invite the reader to sympathize with the loss and sadness.<sup>4</sup>

Likewise, consolation literature was immensely popular, particularly during and after the Civil War. Ministers and female writers wove stories of resignation to God's will and the idea that the lost loved one had gone on to a better place. One of the most popular authors of this genre was Elizabeth Stuart Phelps. Raised by a mother who attended, and took her daughter to, every funeral possible, Phelps had an early exposure to grief and loss. Later, as the Civil War tore the nation apart and littered the countryside with grieving mothers, sisters, wives, and sweethearts, Phelps began her most famous book, *The Gates Ajar*, to comfort devastated women and give them hope. According to Phelps, "Our gayest scenes were black with crape."<sup>5</sup> She was convinced that "even the best and kindest forms of our prevailing beliefs had nothing to say to an afflicted woman that could help her much. Creeds and commentaries and sermons were made by men."<sup>6</sup> Believing herself divinely inspired, Phelps spent two years creating a work that spoke personally to thousands of women, many of whom wrote to her and shared their stories and expressed their gratitude to her. Phelps's view

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, New York: Dover, 1994, pp. 76-77.

<sup>4</sup> D. H. Wever, *A Tribute of Flowers to the Memory of Mother*, Chicago: Wever & Co., 1890.

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *Chapters From a Life*, Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1896, p. 97.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.



of Heaven as being like Earth—only better—allowed her audience to believe they would be reunited with their loved ones in a recognizable form. Her vision of heaven was one where all of Earth's losses and sadnesses were reversed, and where unrequited love was satisfied. It was a place where people had their greatest desires met, and passed along streets lined with trees and fountains. Those who had loved their work on earth did it still in Heaven. Writers wrote, painters painted, those whose careers and potential had been cut short finally developed their abilities to their fullest. In the meantime, those who had gone before thought of and looked over their loved ones still waiting to join them in Heaven. The clergy and press attacked her book as heresy and blasphemy, but Phelps was convinced that nothing she'd written was contradicted in the Bible, and believed the best testimony to the value of her message was the letters she received—every “civil” one personally responded to.<sup>7</sup> An examination of *The Gates Ajar* reveals it to be a combination of sermons, biblical quotations, bits of hymns, lines from poems, allusions to current essays and novels, views of New England village life, and certain elements of the sentimental novel, such as the use of diary form.<sup>8</sup> Phelps at once recognized and empathized with the emotions of her audience, and provided them with a peaceful, hopeful view of death and the afterlife to ease their grief.

Periodicals also influenced the perception of life and attitude towards death. Perhaps most famous of these was *Godey's Lady's Book*, a staple of advice and information on how to create the perfect home and appropriate life. From 1830 until 1898 *Godey's Lady's Book* used popular art to inculcate images of grace and grief on the female mind. While the pages were filled with romantic heroines another romantic fixture was death, as drawings of women

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 118, 119, 122.

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *The Gates Ajar*, Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1964, p. xxv.

sitting near empty cradles also were given to women to ponder.<sup>9</sup> Dominic Ricciotti asserts “in conventional Victorian society mourning constituted one of the few legitimate expressions of extreme emotion.”<sup>10</sup> It is credible that the suppression of sexual energy and expression that is the hallmark of the Victorian public image led to the search, however unconscious, for a means of expressing emotion. Certainly death, ever present and highly individual, provided a forum for the release of these strong feelings.

England in particular influenced the mourning customs of America. Queen Victoria reigned from 1837 to 1901, and when her husband Prince Albert died in 1861, the Queen launched forty years of conspicuous mourning. For the rest of her life, Queen Victoria wore only the black and white that marked her as the world’s most recognizable widow. She set the standard for fashionable mourning clothes in Europe and America.<sup>11</sup> The Queen’s grief is expressed poignantly in a letter to Mary Lincoln upon the death of the President, “No-one can better appreciate than I can who am myself *utterly broken hearted* by the loss of my own beloved Husband, who was the *light* of my Life—my stay—*my all*—what your sufferings must be.”<sup>12</sup>

Mourning clothing and behaviors followed a strict regimen that, given the frequency of death and loss, often dictated much of a woman’s behavior and life. The prescribed dress and behavior of men was far less rigidly defined. But some women spent most of their lives dressed in black or similar colors, as outlined in specific codes of conduct for the months and

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<sup>9</sup> Dominic Ricciotti, “Popular Art in *Godey’s Lady’s Book*: An Image of the American Woman, 1830-1860,” *Historical New Hampshire* 27, no. 1(1972), p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Pool, *What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew. From Fox Hunting to Whist--The Facts of Daily Life in Nineteenth-Century England*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993, p. 255.

<sup>12</sup> Rosalie Maggio, *How They Said It: Wise and Witty Letters from the Famous and Infamous*, Paramus: Prentice Hall, 2000, p. 264.

years following a death. According to John Morley, in *Death, Heaven and the Victorians*, black mourning clothes were “the outward expression of a spiritual state; the blackness of garb spoke desolation within.”<sup>13</sup> The fabric most symbolizing mourning was black crepe, and was not to be worn with any other non-mourning materials—no velvet, satin, lace, bright silk, or embroidery. Crepe, a silk fabric with a crisp or crimped appearance produced by heat, had been associated with mourning from the 1500s. From the 1850s forward, however, it became associated only with death. The care of crepe clothing was demanding. Rainwater left white stains, and recipes for removing stains appeared as early as 1856. Most commonly it was advised to put a piece of black silk under the stain, then dip a camel hair brush in common black ink and rub it over the stain, and then wipe off the excess ink with another piece of silk and the stain would be gone. Women wearing crepe in the summer heat had black stains on their skin, stains that did not come off easily with soap and water. Instead, they used the potentially toxic combination of cream of tartar and oxalic acid. It was not until 1897 that crepe was made waterproof—an innovation so valued that it took the Grand Prix at the Paris Exhibition of 1900.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, it was considered unlucky to keep crepe in the house after mourning periods ended. With each new death new crepe was purchased, new dresses made or purchased (allowing for adjustments to current fashions) and the process began again. Women often devoted huge amounts of time and energy to the care and feeding of their mourning wardrobes. That the black was not easily removed from their skin, that they wore a nearly indelible mourning outfit on their very bodies, cannot be overlooked as contributing to their overall sense of death as a constant companion.

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<sup>13</sup> John Morley, *Death, Heaven and the Victorians*, n.p.: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1971, p. 64.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65.

Other factors affected the prevailing view of death and the attending sentimentality it generated. Viviana A. Zelizer describes the changing attitude towards children in *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children*. According to Zelizer, as society's view of child labor changed, and fewer children made an economic contribution to the family, their emotional value within the family increased. At the same time, the annual birthrate was declining by almost 40 percent between the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>15</sup> Zelizer argues that with fewer children each child became even more precious, not only to their own families but to their communities as well. Between 1820 and 1875 there was what Ann Douglas describes as a "magnification of mourning," and overwhelming "concern among the middle class over a child's untimely death."<sup>16</sup> The tiny coffins produced for children in the 1850s were described as being for the "small household saints" that had been lost, and the death of children became the subject of much funerary art. At the same time, stage productions increasingly depicted the tragic loss of children. Eventually this private and intense grief surrounding the loss of children in the late 1800s became the foundation for public outrage and social movements regarding the deaths of children, whether because of accidents or neglect, in the early 1900s.<sup>17</sup>

Death was also a thriving business for many. In addition to the textile production of crepe, and the growing ready-to-wear clothing market, including jet jewelry and other accessories, there was a move to purchasing pre-made coffins as opposed to building them at home, and an emerging insurance industry. Some people made a more personal business of death. There

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<sup>15</sup> Viviana A. Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child. The Changing Social Value of Children*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985, p. 11.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

were women who hired themselves out as professional mourners, “mutes” who appeared at funerals to lend dignity and numbers to funeral services. The Philadelphia directory for 1810 listed fourteen women as “Layers out of the Dead” who prepared bodies for burial.<sup>18</sup> Professional grave robbers called “resurrectionists” or “sack ‘em up men” watched obituaries and then removed the bodies of the newly buried. Digging down to the coffin, they opened the upper third, pulled the body out—leaving the clothes behind to avoid being accused of stealing—and sold the bodies to medical schools where they were used for dissection.<sup>19</sup> By the 1850s, nearly 700 bodies had been stolen from New York City burial grounds, and the sensational stories of the robberies, and the riots at the medical schools when the practice was discovered, caused many people to hire guards to protect the graves of the newly deceased. Professional undertaking services and the aforementioned pre-made coffins appeared in advertising by 1816, and the first “garden cemetery” was established at Mt. Auburn Cemetery in Boston.<sup>20</sup> Families strolled the grounds and had picnics in the rural cemeteries that spread throughout the Northeast; cemeteries that filled quickly as epidemics of yellow fever, malaria, and cholera swept through the large eastern cities. Typical charges for undertaking services in the nineteenth century included \$1.25 for services provided at the home, including placing the corpse in the coffin, \$10 for preserving the remains on ice, and \$1.50 for acquiring the permit to perform the functions. Some added a few dollars for being “in attendance.” By 1900 the charges for the washing and dressing of a body were \$5,

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 26-27.

<sup>18</sup> Margaret M. Coffin, *Death in Early America*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc., 1976, p. 81.

<sup>19</sup> Stanley B. Burns, *Sleeping Beauty: Memorial Photography in America*, Twelvetreets Press, 1990, n.p.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., n.p.

embalming was \$10, and a hearse cost from \$8 to \$10.<sup>21</sup> By the 1830s life insurance companies focused on emotionally vulnerable beneficiaries who suddenly had more money at one time than they had ever had before, and the growing funeral industry encouraged them to plan elaborate ceremonies for the dead.<sup>22</sup>

In this atmosphere of sentimentality and sensationalism, Americans followed the British lead and embraced the Evangelical “good death.” This meant dying at home surrounded by family members with whom a final farewell was shared, and resignation to God’s will professed. Pain and suffering were borne with fortitude as a test from God, and relatives witnessed the faith of the dying as they read poetry or the Bible to their departing loved one.<sup>23</sup> While the actual death was usually attended only by the immediate family, friends, neighbors, children, and servants were often encouraged to visit the dying person in the final days before the death to gain a better understanding and acceptance of death as the door to sorrow or joy, depending on one’s spiritual state as dictated by the religious views of the time.

In speaking of nineteenth century western culture in general, Robert Fulton said, “As part of a Divine plan, death was the brother to life and as such could be confronted openly, spoken of freely, and treated as a natural phenomenon.”<sup>24</sup> At the same time, the shock of multiple losses to disease, the horror of accidents, and the devastation of the Civil War made death a brutal taskmaster. It is not surprising that a grieving nation torn by war, frightened by sensational stories of grave robbing and premature burial, warned and chastised by the

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<sup>21</sup> Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963, p. 64.

<sup>22</sup> Stanley B. Burns, *Sleeping Beauty: Memorial Photography in America*, Twelvetees Press, 1990, n p.

<sup>23</sup> Pat Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996, p. 26.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Fulton, *Death and Identity*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1965, p. 3.

clergy, and courted by advertisers was consumed by the notion of death. It was in this environment of death, both glorious and ghastly, that photography developed and flourished.

## CHAPTER 4. THE DAWN OF PHOTOGRAPHY

While attempts at capturing images through light and chemicals had long been attempted, the nineteenth century saw the advent of process that changed how people thought of their own physical being, and gave them a means of capturing images of themselves and others. Once photography became part of the social and cultural experience it never slowed. People could not resist the lure of the photographic portrait, large or small, unique or reproduced many times.

In 1839 the first practical photographic method was introduced in France. Louis Jacques Mande Daguerre, a theatrical scene painter, and Joseph Isidore Niepce were partners. Together they developed a workable process of photography that consisted of making an image directly onto a copper plate covered with a thin layer of silver. The silver surface was highly polished and coated with iodine. After exposure in the camera, the plate was held over fumes of heated mercury to develop the image. It was then fixed, or set, by using either a salt solution or hyposulphite of soda. No negatives were involved—each picture was unique and not reproducible. On 7 January 1839 the French government announced Daguerre's and Niepce's discovery, and that the government "agreed to award both men a pension for life in return for full publication of the technical details." At a ceremony twelve days later the French government declared the secrets "free to the world."<sup>1</sup> No sooner was the process revealed than people began utilizing the new technology, both in Europe and in America.

An article in *McClure's Magazine* described the physical environment necessary for the producing of a daguerreotype. The room in which the picture was made was to be painted

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<sup>1</sup> Audrey Linkman, *The Victorians: Photographic Portraits*, New York: Tauris Parke Books, 1993, p. 22.



the brightest white possible, plastered with white lime plaster, or lined with white sheets. The chair upon which the subject sat was to be of yellow wood. The clothing of the individual was also dictated: a man in gray coat, darker pants, white shirt, and a vest of yellow or orange with contrasting figures on it. Women wore the same basic colors, never green or red, and only black if in mourning.<sup>2</sup> The length of the sitting was generally from fifteen to thirty minutes, and care was taken to make sure no clock was shown in the background because of the moving minute hand that would create a blur in the picture.<sup>3</sup>

Monday was considered the best day of business for daguerreotypists because of the Sunday night courtship ritual. Couples vowed to exchange daguerreotypes, and often Monday was the day a gentleman and his sweetheart appeared at the photographer's studio to have their individual pictures made. Typically, the man paid for both pictures and the carrying cases.<sup>4</sup>

By the 1850s, a daguerreotype could be purchased for twenty-five cents. Over thirty million daguerreotypes of all kinds had been taken by the 1860s.<sup>5</sup> Not surprisingly, as the daguerreotype entered mainstream life it also filtered into the vocabulary of the time. Mrs. William B. Dodd's husband was killed in a battle with Sioux Indians. Two weeks later, on 11 September 1862, she wrote in her diary, "I wish I could have daguerreotyped [Johnny's] countenance and attitude as he said yesterday 'Mamma, I'm not afraid. I'll stay by you.'"<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Mrs. D. T. Davis, "The Daguerreotype in America," *McClure's Magazine* 8, no. 1 (November 1896), n.p.

<sup>3</sup> Rosalie Maggio, *How They Said It: Wise and Witty Letters from the Famous and Infamous*, Paramus: Prentice Hall, 2000, p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Mrs. D. T. Davis, "The Daguerreotype in America," *McClure's Magazine* 8, no. 1 (November 1896), n.p.

<sup>5</sup> Stanley B. Burns, *Sleeping Beauty: Memorial Photography in America*, Twelvetees Press, 1990, n.p.

<sup>6</sup> Paul C. Rosenblatt, *Bitter, Bitter Tears: Nineteenth-Century Diarists and Twentieth-Century Grief Theorists*, Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1983, p. 141.

The daguerreotype process entered American culture during unsettling times, as John Stauffer points out. Steamboats and railroads took people far and wide, changing the communities they left behind by their absence, as well as changing new communities by their contributions. The Panic of 1837 caused widespread economic depression, and no sooner did it appear to end than another, less obvious depression began eating away at the laboring class. Questions about personal and national identity grew out of this instability.<sup>7</sup> Photographs helped create identity, both in what they revealed and in what was not shown.

Albert Southworth and Josiah Hawes of Boston were considered among the most artistic of daguerreotypists of the mid-nineteenth century. Their clientele consisted of the middle and upper classes, and they sought out famous and powerful people to be subjects of photographs. While many daguerreian studios catered to the working class by offering twenty-five cent photographs, and built their reputations on taking hundreds of portraits daily, Southworth and Hawes intentionally priced their services beyond the reach of the average person. They charged fifteen dollars on average, for one daguerreotype, which was more than most laborers earned in a week. Even their lowest price, five dollars for a sixth plate image, or approximately nine inches square, was more than most families could afford.<sup>8</sup>

Inventors were always looking for ways to improve the photographic process. The wet collodion process was a different and superior technology, allowing for the reproduction of prints where daguerreotypes did not. This consisted of a glass plate coated with a mixture of collodion and potassium iodide and sensitized immediately by a second coating of silver nitrate. The plate became exposed in the camera while still wet because it lost sensitivity

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<sup>7</sup> John Stauffer, "Daguerreotyping the National Soul: The Portraits of Southworth and Hawes, 1843-1860," *Prospects* 22 (1997), p. 71.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

upon drying. It surpassed any other method being experimented with at the time, and from this process followed the beginning of paper photographic prints.<sup>9</sup> The exposure time for the collodion was much shorter, often as little as thirty seconds. This was not only more comfortable for the sitter, but also allowed the photographer a greater volume in the number of sittings he could do in a day.<sup>10</sup> As might be expected, people exploited as many avenues of the new technology as possible. Doormen working for photographers often hawked the wares of their employers' studios. According to his diary entry for 22 March 1862, A. J. Munky of Lambeth, England, was introduced to "a girl who was willing to have a picture of her taken with *her clothes up*" [emphasis in original].<sup>11</sup> Thus, photography found many new enthusiasts and expanded forms of expression.

Initially, the price of the "daguerreotype," as Daguerre's and Niepce's discovery was known, was considered expensive by many and only the middle and upper class could afford them. Eventually, with competition, prices came down. The wet collodion process offered significant improvement and brought photographic images into the financial reach of working class people. In her book, *The Victorians: Photographic Portraits*, Audrey Linkman explains that photographers sought to create in their photographic images a quality that was akin to those conveyed by portrait artists; thus photographers worked within the narrow stereotypes of acceptable community standards for the sexes and the time period. Women should appear modest, simple, and chaste; men should appear dignified, strong, and noble.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Audrey Linkman, *The Victorians: Photographic Portraits*, New York: Tauris Parke Books, 1993, pp. 28-29.

<sup>10</sup> Rosalie Maggio, *How They Said It: Wise and Witty Letters from the Famous and Infamous*, Paramus: Prentice Hall, 2000, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> Audrey Linkman, *The Victorians: Photographic Portraits*, New York: Tauris Parke Books, 1993, p. 31.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

This alignment with the principles and possibilities of portrait painters conferred, or so was their hope, a respectability which photographers sought. As more and more photographers appeared, distinguishing oneself through an artistic reputation became even more important.

It is interesting to note the dynamics of the relationship between the photographer and the sitter, as the subject of the photograph was known. Although those same dynamics did not apply to the subjects of postmortem photography, it is likely that the same attitudes were reflected as the photographer dealt with the deceased person's relatives and friends. Linkman offers that "every manual on photographic portraiture had its chapter devoted to the 'Management of the Sitter,'" which advised photographers to remain in control of the sitter, and to not sacrifice their superior judgment to that of the subject. They were to be patient, polite, and courteous, but firm because they had the ultimate control—they could refuse to take the picture.<sup>13</sup>

Most photographers probably met their subjects only minutes before the sitting. It was undoubtedly the same in most postmortem situations, so there was limited time to get to "know" the subject of the photograph. Until embalming became a common practice, after the Civil War, bodies changed and deteriorated rapidly. Achieving a pleasing image required quick action, before rigor mortis and other distortions occurred.

In writing about photographing urban areas, Peter B. Hales noted in 1984, "It is difficult for modern Americans to comprehend the power and influence photography had for the generations of Americans living even a century ago."<sup>14</sup> It is impossible to underestimate how photography captured the minds and spirits of nineteenth-century Americans. The

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>14</sup> Peter B. Hales, *Silver Cities. The Photography of American Urbanization, 1839-1915*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984, p. 4.

magical, mystical aspects of the new technology fascinated people. The ability to see themselves in a permanent image was completely new. Almost every aspect of life was considered something to photograph. Photography studios were often no more than carts or tents, and they were everywhere in urban areas, in many small towns, and traveling photographers served the rural areas. The more plentiful supply of skilled photographers increased competition and pushed prices down, and soon much of the working class could afford photographs as well. The upper class and elite tended to sit for formal portraits, but the middle and working classes sought photographs of the events and moments of their daily lives, which oftentimes included death.

Many families in the mid to late 1800s, particularly those in rural areas, had not yet had the chance to have a photograph made before a family member died. Seizing this last opportunity to have a picture of the deceased, the family engaged a photographer to preserve the likeness and the memory of the family member. Many photographers advertised their willingness to take pictures of the dead, and some promised that they could arrive within the hour. Since embalming was not practiced before the Civil War, a photograph that would present a pleasing image had to be taken shortly after death, before the features began to change. In this regard, daguerreotypes differed from painted portraits. While painted portraits could inject a level of animation into the likeness of the deceased, a daguerreotype could only record the stark reality of death. For this reason, and because of the difference in cost, most artists and photographers were not in direct competition with each other. One offered the illusion of life in death; the other could only make people appear to be sleeping.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Jay Ruby, *Secure the Shadow*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995, p. 43.

The carte de viste, patented in November 1854, and invented by Andre' Adolphe Eugene Disderi, was very popular. Meant as a replacement for the more traditional calling card, the card mount contained a small picture. Not only did individuals have cartes made, but celebrity cartes were immensely popular. Published by the thousands, and with images such as England's Royal Family, the cartes were sold from print shops, stationers, booksellers, fancy goods and novelty emporia, and even vendors in the street.<sup>16</sup> Between 1860 and 1862, three to four million cartes were sold of Queen Victoria alone, and over two million of the Prince of Wales and Princess Alexandra after they married in 1863.<sup>17</sup> Cartes were good indicators of public sentiment and approval, revealing which public figures most captured their attention.

As photographs gained popularity the photograph album became popular. Where photographs had been placed in general scrapbooks before, album producers capitalized on the idea that special photographs deserved special preservation and presentation. For this reason cartes were also known as album portraits. These ornate albums were designed to resemble bibles, hymnals, and other religious books, with heavy leather bindings and metal clasps.<sup>18</sup> The obvious intent was to imbue photography with the respect afforded more traditional activities, such as worship. Family Bibles had long been the repositories of family information—births, deaths, and marriages were recorded in the pages to be preserved for future generations. Photographs began to blur the lines of what needed to be, in fact what could be, recorded as well with pen and ink as opposed to the magic and seeming permanence of photographs. The photograph album began to command a place of honor in

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

the home much as the Bible had, and for the second half of the nineteenth century photograph albums were popular and acceptable as gifts for birthdays and Christmas. By 1889, wedding albums were a fashion craze.<sup>19</sup>

By 1864, the *carte de visite* was losing popularity. It was replaced in the 1870s by the cabinet card, or cabinet. The cabinet was larger, with a paper print measuring 5 ½ x 4 inches and placed on a 6 ½ x 4 ¼ inch card mount. No new equipment or lenses were necessary to produce cabinets, and there was no patent in force to drive up costs and thereby inhibit popularity. With no significant increase in cost for photographers, cabinets were easily and widely produced, and they remained popular for the next forty years.<sup>20</sup> The basic card mount for the cabinet did not change through the end of the century, though rounded corners instead of squared, or borders of gold, did go in and out of fashion.

The retouching of photographs created controversy and stirred debate. Retouching added color to the otherwise black, white, and gray tones and allowed for the alteration of some features of photograph. Throughout the nineteenth century daguerreotypes and collodion prints were regularly hand-colored to add warmth to the otherwise cool tones. Unfortunately, during the 1860s, the materials used for retouching deteriorated badly on the print, fueling attitudes against the procedure. The 1862 International Exhibition excluded retouched work from display. According to Audrey Linkman, “the general climate of opinion among serious photographers in the early 1860s sanctioned unretouched work as ‘pure’ photography, and condemned retouching as a dodge to conceal poor workmanship and incompetence.”<sup>21</sup> Individual photographers of the time who valued their professional

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pp. 75-76.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp. 77-78.

reputation generally disavowed the practice of retouching to avoid the charge that they had interfered with the “truth of nature,” or relied on the explanation that technical limitations contributed to the distortion that caused the need for retouching. However, larger commercial studios generally condoned retouching, and began hiring in-house retouchers rather than contracting the work out.<sup>22</sup>

Linkman’s work on Victorian photography provides a good look at the social atmosphere surrounding portrait taking. She asserts that “progress from cradle to coffin was punctuated by visits to the studio.” Christenings, engagements, weddings and anniversaries, and even death were occasions to be preserved through photographs. However, in most cases, except for death, the sitters went to the photographer’s studio. He, and there is only rare mention of women as photographers during the nineteenth century, did not attend the actual event. For this reason, there is little documentary evidence available for the photographs.<sup>23</sup> They were not seen or treated as historical records beyond a family’s own sense of preserving information. The technology was still so new, the possibilities as yet so unexplored, that photographs were not thought of as artifacts in most cases. Photographers did tend to pursue the idea of infants as sitters for portraits because it often led to a longer, more profitable relationship with the family. The white wedding originated with wealthy Victorians and provided another possible source of business.

By 1884, George Eastman of Rochester, New York had developed a flexible, paper-backed film that could be wound on rollers. His hope was to capture the imagination and

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 80-81.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 107



money of the amateur photographer. He designed a small black box camera that cost twenty-five dollars and came pre-loaded with a one hundred-exposure roll of film. The photographer pulled a string to cock the shutter, turned a key to advance the film, and pressed the trigger. When all the exposures had been taken, the customer sent the camera back to Eastman. The film was developed and reloaded and the camera and pictures sent back to the customer. He called the camera the “Kodak”—a name he made up—because he liked the strong “K” sound, there was no other product with which it could be confused, and the name could not be translated. That first year he sold thirteen thousand cameras, and applied most of the profits to further research. By the 1890s, he had perfected daylight-loading film that allowed the customer to load the camera. He also modified and improved his cameras, making them simpler and cheaper, and bought up competing companies so that by the 1920s Kodak dominated the market.<sup>24</sup>

Nancy Martha West has done a thorough study of the Kodak Company archives, and details George Eastman’s business philosophy and strategies. She contends that Kodak’s advertising eliminated sorrow and death from domestic photography by teaching amateur photographers that to make something consumable is to affirm it, that when something becomes a commodity to purchase it takes on social significance.<sup>25</sup> By the end of the 1800s, American culture was moving toward a more optimistic view of life and its possibilities. Consuming death through photographs and other means was slowly growing less desirable. Eastman changed forever the idea of who was to practice photography.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Richard L. Scheffel, ed. et al, *Discovering America's Past: Customs, Legends, History, & Lore of Our Great Nation*, Pleasantville, NY: The Reader's Digest Association, 1993, pp. 352-353.

<sup>25</sup> Nancy Martha West, *Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia*, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000, p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> Robert E. Mensel, “‘Kodakers Lying in Wait’: Amateur Photography in New York, 1885-1915,” *American Quarterly* 43, no.1 (March 1991), p. 28.

Not everyone was completely comfortable with photographic technology. From its earliest introduction there was a suggestion of the magical, a hint of the supernatural, and a fear of the occult that made many people uneasy. Robert E. Mensel's examination of the attitudes of Victorians reveals that many were concerned about how much "reality" the photograph would capture. The x-ray was another new technology of the time, and the distinction between reality and fantasy was often eerily unclear. Some of this apprehension was directed toward photographers and photography.<sup>27</sup>

Victorian Americans were often extremely concerned with the projection of character and image. Facial expression was seen as the key to a person's true sentiment, so it is understandable that most of the photographs from the period show serious, somber people. This was intended to project stability and restraint. As more and more people possessed their own cameras, and took more pictures, some people became uncomfortable with the notion of being photographed unawares or unprepared as they went about their daily lives. Some even pursued the matter in the courts, only to find the legal system less than supportive of a person's right to remain unphotographed. Laws eventually limited the unauthorized use of a person's image to sell products, but neglected to protect the sanctity of a person's privacy in regard to being photographed in the first place.<sup>28</sup>

Clearly, photography and cameras were among the most fascinating of innovations in the nineteenth century. They changed the culture, and they changed the very way people perceived themselves and their surroundings. Photography gave people a way to preserve their memories of life and to defy, in some small way, the permanence of death.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., pp. 28, 30.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 31-39.

## CHAPTER 5. INTERPRETING PHOTOGRAPHS

“Photographic analysis requires patience, imagination, and luck.”<sup>1</sup>

As Marsha Peters and Bernard Mergen so aptly point out, “we have become accustomed to looking at photographs as decorations instead of learning to appreciate the photograph itself as a source of information about the subject at hand.”<sup>2</sup> We think in terms of photographic images. Our own lives and special occasions, and the events of our nation’s history, are preserved in most of our minds as a series of mental photographs. Birthdays, weddings, pioneers standing in front of sod houses, John F. Kennedy’s assassination—all are frozen as photographic entities. We do not have the ability to block those from our minds. We are a photograph culture.

Peters and Mergen have studied how photographs can be used in the field of American Studies. They contend that photographs are usually overlooked in much the same way as other items of material culture, that “few historians bother to look at them,” relying instead on written sources.<sup>3</sup> They also point to the same bias being a danger to the “visual document” as to the written.<sup>4</sup> This could not be more true than when considering a postmortem photograph.

Death is an incredibly difficult subject from which to achieve distance—and nothing like objectivity is truly possible. Even the act of attempting to set aside one’s own thoughts is to dwell, however briefly, in that realm, and contemplate one’s own demise. In addition, social factors, family attitudes, religious beliefs, age, all contribute to the biases toward the

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<sup>1</sup> Marsha Peters and Bernard Mergen, “‘Doing the Rest’: The Uses of Photographs in American Studies,” *American Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (1997), p. 300.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 280.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 281.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 282.

photograph. Also, as we read to determine the extent of death's details, the intensity of events portrayed, we set limits that correspond to our ability to deal with the thought. When we are confronted with a visual image we sometimes lose the ability to control the impact of the picture on our emotions. While close examination reveals greater details, there is the initial harsh reality of looking at whatever the photograph reveals—in the case of postmortem photography that is a dead body.

Interpreting a photograph is to look for clues that help tell the story of what may have gone on at that particular moment in time when the photograph was taken. Placement, clothing, furnishings, positioning, hairstyles, and surroundings all play a part in providing clues. There are also factors we cannot know, the mood and temperament of the sitter, the attitude and agenda of the photographer, what restraints—physical or socially—affect the posture of the subject, and countless other nuances that defy our recognition.

In the case of postmortem photography there are emotional aspects we can only speculate about. Though the photograph may show only the deceased, is the family standing nearby? Is their grief affecting the photographer as he works? Was he free to position the body to its best appearance for the picture, or did the presence of others inhibit his work and thereby provide a less than optimal view of the body? Is the photographer sensitive to the situation, or is this business as usual? What caused the death? How long has the person been dead?—a crucial element in the appearance of the body. What are the social attitudes of the time and culture regarding clothing, flowers, caskets, and death itself?

Answers to these questions are not likely to appear written on the photograph, nor can they be accurately discerned from examining the photograph. Speculation is the most that is possible. As Peters and Mergen assert, however, the “lack of identifying information does not

eliminate the photograph as a document.”<sup>5</sup> The photograph still constructs and reveals meaning; it still represents human history.

While there is no standardized model for examining and analyzing photographs, John Szarkowski outlines, in *The Photographer's Eye*, what he considers the five elements of a photograph. These are useful for the historian to consider when approaching a visual document. Szarkowski's first element is what he calls “The Thing Itself,” or the subject of the photograph. While we tend to believe the photograph is a truth, that the subject and photograph are the same, in reality the subject projects a persona, the truth of which is unknown to us, and only the photograph, not the subject, survives.

The second element is “The Detail”—in what context is the photograph taken? When the photographer works in his studio he creates the reality, encases the activity within his structured environment. When he goes out into the world, goes to the events rather than having them come to him, the view changes. However he might try to avoid it, he is now a part of the activity he is photographing. Yet another photographer could come upon the scene, take a picture, and place the first photographer as a participant, rather than merely an observer and recorder of the action.

The third element is “The Frame,” or what is included within the picture. As in all things, whenever something is chosen, something is left unchosen. The photographer creates, constructs, the vision of what was most valuable to record at that moment. We incorporate the picture as representing the whole, when actually it is a fragment of the total situation—even within the studio, but especially outside of it. The selective nature of the photograph challenges us to think, literally, of the bigger picture.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 290.

Szarkowski's fourth element is "Time." In its earliest incarnation, photography was a slow process compared to what we think of now. Exposures took many minutes rather than the split second of modern cameras. The earliest studios in New York were on upper floors and employed skylights in an attempt to capture the most and best light available. Taking a photograph was often a matter of waiting for the best light, beginning to take the picture, hoping the light lasted, and with the subject sitting through the long process—immobile. The slow nature of the exposure meant movement could not be captured—time could not be stopped in that way. With technical improvements in cameras, processes, and eventually film, the ability to freeze moments of time became possible. A twenty-year difference in time can account for a much different experience for both the subject and the photographer generating the image. Even at its most advanced, a photograph only captures a fraction of the action and events transpiring at any given time.

The final element is "Vantage Point," or the photographer's viewpoint. As the photographer selects a perspective, based on lighting, subject matter, and other factors, he also creates a reality. We are left with the impression, however incorrect, that this one view is the only view possible. Instead, it is one of many possible perspectives. We can only guess at what factors made the photographer choose the perspective he did.<sup>6</sup>

Other elements must also be considered, though they only add to the uncertainty and questions surrounding photographs. The skill and experience of the photographer, the technician capturing the image, is always a factor. Many of the earliest daguerreotypists came from the ranks of craftsmen, more accustomed to forges, metals, small tools, electricity,

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 287.

and magnetism.<sup>7</sup> The technology was new and constantly evolving. It would be years before apprenticeships could develop because no one was a master of the techniques involved. If a photographer had his own studio, he undoubtedly placed a greater priority on his public reputation and how that affected his business. He might be inclined to offer a more artistic setting and presentation than the photographer working in a “picture factory,” where sitters passed through like cattle; photographs were inexpensive, fast, and standardized; and artistic interpretation was much less of a consideration.<sup>8</sup>

One of the most important aspects of photographs, and something impossible to determine from examining them, is the attitude of the subject in the picture toward photography itself. We might infer, from the fact that the person is in the picture that they approve of, even embrace, the opportunity for the likeness to be made. However, we cannot know what unseen pressures contributed to the presence of the person in the photograph. It is the one question we can answer clearly about a postmortem photograph—the circumstance that put the person in the picture is his or her death. But then we are left with the thoughts and feelings of the family or friends choosing to have the picture taken. Many people had an uneasy affection for photography. The aura of alchemy that surrounded daguerreotypes, and led to many photographers being called “professor,” called up taboos and fears related to graven images, likenesses, icons, reflections, mirrors, and the occult. A major concern of the Victorian era was character and its projection. The goal between photographer and sitter was to walk the line between presenting an accurate and respectable projection of inner character without revealing too much of the inner self, lest that be an inappropriate display of

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<sup>7</sup> Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans*, U.S.: Hill and Wang, 1989, p. 21.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

emotion.<sup>9</sup> This was the beginning of the idea of social identity, of people becoming aware of themselves as having an image, an image that could be captured and held up to them at a later point.<sup>10</sup> It can be argued that photography, possibly second only to religion, encouraged or caused people to examine their behavior and thoughts—to develop a self-conscious awareness—more than any other cultural factor of the nineteenth century. In *Photography is a Language*, John Whiting asserts that photography has done more than transportation to “create a sense of oneness.”<sup>11</sup> Photography became a part of people’s lives at the same time as steam and train travel, as developments in telegraphy and printing progressed, yet it still captured and held people’s attention like no other emerging technology. The Panic of 1837 made it a difficult time to start a new business. Nonetheless, a New York correspondent, writing in a Washington newspaper in 1843, said the only people making money were “beggars and the takers of likeness by daguerreotypes.”<sup>12</sup>

Whiting divides the functions of the camera into two main roles: the camera as a “tool of examination” when it documents, stops motion, records progress, and shows patterns of social change; and the camera as a “tool of communication” when it transmits information, as in radar, newspapers and magazines, and instructional manuals. However, as Whiting notes, these roles are seldom independent of each other.<sup>13</sup> Peters and Mergen find the impact of photography as communication to be the more subtle but more profound influence. By the 1840s, the pictorial press began responding to the public demand for illustrated news, and by

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 13, 27.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>11</sup> John R. Whiting, *Photography is a Language*, Chicago: Ziff Davis, 1946, p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans*, U.S.: Hill and Wang, 1989, p. 21.

<sup>13</sup> John R. Whiting, *Photography is a Language*, Chicago: Ziff Davis, 1946, p. 8.



the 1880s, the half-tone process, and other photomechanical innovations allowed reprinting of photographs directly from negatives. Thus, the photograph culture evolved and became a staple of daily life.<sup>14</sup>

Clearly, many elements must be considered when approaching photographs as visual documents. They are often too difficult to deal with—and yet too compelling to deny. In most cases nothing more is possible than educated speculation about the subject and circumstances of the subject. Historical societies, librarians, and antique shops possess boxes of photographs which contain bits and pieces of lives and events, most of which suffer from the same limitations—little or no identifying information to provide concrete facts about the photographs. Yet the very fact is that they survive, with faces that look out at us, and that which appears to have gone on also touches us. This is reason enough to approach photographs with respect and attentiveness for the unique historical document that each one constitutes.

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<sup>14</sup> Marsha Peters and Bernard Mergen, "'Doing the Rest': The Uses of Photographs in American Studies," *American Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (1997), p. 291.

## CHAPTER 6. POSTMORTEM PHOTOGRAPHY

Creating likenesses of the deceased began in America shortly after the first settlements were established. The first mortuary portraits appeared as early as the late 1600s.<sup>1</sup> These portraits attempted to capture the essence of the person when they were alive, and often included depictions of personal articles. A child might be portrayed standing by a cherished pet or holding a doll. In 1747, Joseph Badger painted the first known “corpse portrait” in America to commemorate the death of a Massachusetts woman.<sup>2</sup> The artist Charles Willson Peale painted “Rachel Weeping” in 1772 upon the death of his infant daughter. In 1776, he added his wife to the picture in her role as the mourning mother. He then put the painting on public display and created an image that many bought for display in their homes, and that inspired numerous imitations.<sup>3</sup> Portraits of this nature often contained images associated with death such as a clock or watch to indicate time stopped when the person died, wilted flowers, a willow tree, or the person surrounded by clouds. Posthumous mourning paintings were done by less well-known artists with little academic training who advertised their services. It is generally believed that most artists who did portraits also painted dead children at some point.<sup>4</sup> These paintings were displayed where the family and visitors alike could view them. Ann Masson and Bryce Reveley have gathered portraits of mourning women in their article “When Life’s Brief Sun Was Set: Portraits of Southern Women in Mourning—1830-1860.” They make the point that these portraits of serene women in black “reflected the attitude that death was not a horror but a natural aspect of life

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<sup>1</sup> Jay Ruby, *Secure the Shadow*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995, p. 30

<sup>2</sup> Stanley B. Burns, *Sleeping Beauty: Memorial Photography in America*, Twelvetreets Press, 1990, n.p.

<sup>3</sup> Jay Ruby, *Secure the Shadow*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995, p. 31.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

that could be associated readily with the beautiful and eternal principles of classical art.”<sup>5</sup> Subsequently, photographers would attempt to align themselves with portrait artists in an effort to bestow upon themselves credibility and prestige. Other means of capturing the likeness of the deceased were employed as well. Roxana Beecher, the wife of minister Lyman Beecher, sketched their dead daughter on a piece of ivory immediately after her death, before there was any deterioration of the child’s appearance.<sup>6</sup> In the 1830s, Currier and Ives and D. W. Kellogg & Company mass-produced inexpensive memorial lithographs that people bought and displayed in their homes.<sup>7</sup>

Few visual documents are as immediately arresting and disturbing as postmortem photographs from the nineteenth century. No matter how accustomed we have become to seeing images of the dead in newspapers and magazines, or depictions of death on film, the black and white stark reality of a photograph of a dead person from the 1800s is at once jolting and thought-provoking. Often the inclination is to turn away—then look again. Strangely compelling, undeniably heart-tugging when the images are of children, postmortem photographs are an unique genre within the larger realm of photographs in general.

In those earliest moments of confronting the postmortem photograph, we must tame the biases and emotions wrenched from us without warning or our having given our consent. We must turn from the often asked question of “How could they?” to the more appropriate “Why would they?” As with any other actors under consideration as historical figures, those who sought the services of a photographer for the purpose of

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<sup>5</sup> Ann Masson and Bryce Reveley, “When Life’s Brief Sun Was Set: Portraits of Southern Women in Mourning, 1830-1860,” *Southern Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (1988), p. 34.

<sup>6</sup> Jay Ruby, *Secure the Shadow*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995, p. 34.

<sup>7</sup> Stanley B. Burns, *Sleeping Beauty: Memorial Photography in America*, Twelvetees Press, 1990, n.p.

capturing the likeness of a deceased person had motives and desires. Their choices were constructed within their own time period, needs, and expectation. We have an obligation to attempt to consider what may have transpired at the time the photograph was made.

Certainly, some of these photographs have developed a cult-like following, especially in our modern computer culture where the internet makes the viewing and downloading of photographs worldwide a possibility. Yet that should not discourage the historian researching death, photography, or the nineteenth century from considering them as serious, valuable, visual documents worthy of study.

No discussion of nineteenth-century postmortem photography should proceed without at least a brief mention of Mathew Brady and his Civil War photography. Though the focus of this research is the private individual's desire to have postmortem photographs made, Brady's work so infiltrated society that his influence on the thinking of people, as they considered photography, cannot be overlooked. People were aware of Brady and his work, saw his battlefield images, and could not help but incorporate the knowledge that the technology was available, the recording of death acceptable, and perhaps possible for them as they confronted their own losses.

Samuel F. B. Morse, inventor of the first successful telegraph, and creator of the Morse code, taught Mathew Brady the mechanics of photography in the late 1840s. Brady became interested in photography as a young man, and eventually added an element of showmanship to photography that made, and lost, him a fortune by shortly after the Civil War. Brady began with his own financial reserves, and cultivated the friendships and support of senators, cabinet members, generals, and other noted men who helped him with what he saw as a documentation project of the Civil War. President Abraham Lincoln gave Brady a

piece of paper that simply said, “Pass Brady,” allowing him access to the Union camps and battlefields. The Union soldiers dubbed his equipment wagons “Whatisit Wagons.” Loaded with chemicals, plates, and cameras, Brady’s wagons rolled onto the battlefields in the aftermath of the violence and gore and captured the images for posterity. At one point Brady had as many as twenty operators in the field, usually working in pairs, while Brady himself was hundreds of miles away. He trained and supplied the men, and arranged for their passage through the lines. They set up two tents, one for the camera, and the other as a dark tent, or portable dark room. Brady’s pictures were displayed in his studios, published in picture magazines, and even sold as stereoscopic pictures for home viewing with a stereopticon. Brady hoped to make money to offset his many expenses, but by the end of the war Brady was bankrupt. All of the negatives of the battlefield scenes were made in duplicate or triplicate, and the War Department paid Brady approximately \$28,000 for a set. In 1911, fifteen years after Brady’s death, a ten-volume collection of his 3,500 pictures was published as the *Photographic History of the Civil War*.<sup>8</sup> Brady’s pictures were widely known, like nothing anyone had seen before, and could not help but make an impression on anyone who saw them. We can only speculate as to how the private individual was influenced to think of photographing death because of these images, but it is reasonable to argue that, at the very least, postmortem photography became more of a possibility in people’s minds. No respectable photographer would have denied familiarity with Brady’s work, increasing the likelihood of the photographer providing the service. Many hoped to emulate what they mistakenly saw as Brady’s great financial success. As late as the 1880s many photographers

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<sup>8</sup> John R. Whiting, *Photography is a Language*, Chicago: Ziff Davis, 1946, pp. 11-15.

advertised “a readiness to make pictures from Corpses if desired.” They also photographed houses lost to fire or the deaths of family pets.<sup>9</sup>

The private individual’s desires and needs were far different from the battlefield photographer’s when it came to postmortem photography. It was not a matter of documentation for public record but rather preservation for personal memory. Despite the widespread popularity of photography, many families had not had the opportunity to have photographs taken. Photographers did travel to rural areas in the Midwest and West, taking their services to more remote places not yet touched by, or having ready access to, the technological innovations of the day. But not all areas were served, and the strained economic conditions that often accompanied rural life prevented many from having pictures made. Only when death occurred did many turn, in desperation, to photography to capture the last precious images of departed loved ones. Even if not readily available, photography was acceptable to people. The newspapers they saw, no matter how long they might take to reach them, contained photographic images. Family members from the East, where photography studios were abundant and affordable for even the working class, sent photographs to their distant relatives. In urban areas photographers vied for the customers’ attention and money. They set up temporary tent studios at social events, making it even easier for people to partake of their services. The camera, and the photograph were part and parcel of Victorian life.

Death also was a constant feature of Victorian life. The average life expectancy in the mid-nineteenth century was forty years old. Families frequently lost their children to epidemics of cholera, tuberculosis, or influenza. Marilyn Irvin Holt relates that “Anna and

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<sup>9</sup> Nancy Martha West, *Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia*, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000, pp. 139, 140.

William Beal, a Kansas couple who tried homesteading, farming and town life, reacted to the possibility of death by photographing their children—just in case.”<sup>10</sup> Accidents and infections that are treatable today claimed many lives. It is not surprising that two of the most prevalent influences on Victorian life—photography and death—intersected at the point of grief and desperation. Photography was not as immediately associated with celebration then as it is for the individual now. Then it was a means of preserving memories, not as a historical record, but as a private record of life.

As Deborah A. Smith explains, the “cult of domesticity,” with its value on home life, peaked in the nineteenth century. The strong emphasis on family life caused Victorians great distress at the thought of separation through death. There was a strong hope and faith in the body’s resurrection after death, that they would be recognizable to each other once in heaven.<sup>11</sup> A visual record of the deceased was a constant reminder of the face that would someday be seen again. It was a way to keep the family intact.

The sleep metaphor was extremely meaningful to Victorians. Gravestones of the time were inscribed with “Asleep in Jesus,” “Sweetly Sleeping,” “Sleeping with Mama,” “At Rest,” and “Rest in Peace.” Those in cemeteries were sometimes referred to as “sleepers,” and sleep was more in keeping with the Christian ideas of resurrection and Last Judgment.<sup>12</sup> It was not a matter of pretending the person was sleeping; rather, it was creating and holding the peaceful image of repose and rest. Since ancient Greek civilization death had been associated with sleep, and the idea was reinforced by Saint Paul and Martin Luther. This

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<sup>10</sup> Marilyn Irvin Holt, *Linoleum, Better Babies & The Modern Farm Woman, 1890-1930*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995, p. 95.

<sup>11</sup> Deborah A. Smith, “‘The Visage Once So Dear’: Interpreting Memorial Photographs,” *Dublin Seminar For New England FolkLife, Annual Proceedings* 19 (1994), p. 257.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 266-267.

association encouraged the practice of whispering or being silent near the dead so as not to “wake” them. According to Dr. Stanley Burns, in his book *Sleeping Beauty: Memorial Photography in America*, “The discovery of anesthesia in 1846 was a turning point in the concept of death, offering a powerful connection between death and sleep as people were spared pain and suffering during surgery.”<sup>13</sup> This additional factor, another emerging technology, helped create the belief that death could be like sleeping, with a waking in the afterlife, and this notion comforted many.

When someone died in the nineteenth century they were usually at, or near, home. That was where the body was prepared for viewing by friends and family, for subsequent burial, and for a photograph to be taken. The preparation of the body meant washing the skin, fixing the hair, and dressing the body. A board was usually placed on two chairs, draped with a sheet, and ice, if available, was placed under the boards to create a cool space, and pieces of ice were placed around the body. A forked stick was placed between the breast bone and chin to hold the mouth closed and was then fastened with a string. Coins were placed on the eyelids to keep them closed. In the summer, someone was positioned near the body to brush the flies away, and if the body was to remain overnight someone stayed with it to keep the mice away as well. Visitation of the deceased and the grieving family took place while the coffin was being made. If the coffin was being purchased, someone notified the cabinetmaker or furniture dealer. He generally kept a small stock on hand and he, or the undertaker, brought the coffin to the house.<sup>14</sup> The whole burial process might take place within a day’s

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<sup>13</sup> Stanley B. Burns, *Sleeping Beauty Memorial Photography in America*, Twelvetreets Press, 1990, n.p.

<sup>14</sup> Jay Ruby, *Secure the Shadow*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995, p. 72.



time, because embalming, and the longer funerary period it allowed, was not common until after 1880.<sup>15</sup>

For the sake of achieving a satisfying image, haste was generally necessary in contacting the photographer and accomplishing his quick arrival. Many advertised their ability to be at the home within the hour. A body begins to deteriorate, to become rigid, fairly quickly after death. Particularly in the summer heat a body would deteriorate faster. If enough ice could be obtained in great enough quantities a body might be maintained in fairly good form for days, but that was an unpredictable situation. The best course of action was to send someone for the photographer, and prepare the body in anticipation of his arrival. In other cases, the body was taken to the photographer's studio. Clearly, this presented challenges. A means of transportation was necessary, as well as a certain measure of privacy for both the deceased and the family. During epidemics the practice of taking the body to the photographer was discouraged, if not prohibited by law, for fear of spreading disease.

To photograph the person in a coffin defeated any attempt to successfully suggest sleep. When an appearance of sleep was desired the person was photographed on a piece of furniture—a bed, a chair, or a sofa draped with cloth or a sheet. Babies were often photographed in their buggies. In the case of adults, the photograph usually focused on the facial features. The limitations of the process made it difficult to photograph the full length of the body and still have sufficient detail in the face. The small size of children, however, did make it possible to show the entire body. Babies often were dressed in christening gowns, special dresses, or tiny suits, often in white as an indication of their innocence and purity, creating the suggestion of angelic qualities. Occasionally, personal items, such as toys, were

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

included with older children, and adults sometimes held a book or flowers, but the inclusion of such items was not the norm.

Another variation of postmortem photographs was to include mourners in the picture. One of the more common and poignant poses is of the husband and children of a woman posing beside her body, the husband holding a new baby as evidence both that she died in childbirth and that life goes on. These photographs were particularly meaningful as mementoes to send to family members who were too far away to attend the occasions of both sadness and joy. Some photographs show the mother or father holding a small child, or less commonly both parents are included with the child. Least frequent, but interesting, are the dramatic scenes, resembling a tableau, that attempted to explain what had happened. Similar, in a way, to the father holding his newborn child when his wife has died in childbirth, is the depiction of one parent holding the dead child while the other holds or sits near bottles of medicine. The mother may hold a handkerchief to her mouth, or the father sits holding his head in his hands, both indicating their grief at having attempted whatever medical interventions were possible and finding them insufficient.

Another variation of poses was referred to as the “alive, yet dead” pose.<sup>16</sup> The dead person was photographed with the eyes open so as to appear alive. Though many times the vacant stare betrayed the reality, occasionally a subject appeared quite lifelike, and only other clues, like the position of the hands, made it clear that the subject was dead. Sometimes photographs were taken this way because no others had been taken when the person was alive. Other times, particularly when the photograph was a close-up of the face, it was to serve as a model for a portrait to be painted later. According to the gossip in Black River

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

Falls, Wisconsin in 1898, Mrs. Friedel had a picture taken of her baby in its coffin. Later, “when a fellow came up the road who did enlargements, she had just the baby’s face blown up to a two foot picture. But since the baby’s eyes were closed, she had an artist paint them open so she could hang it in the parlor.”<sup>17</sup>

Painting on eyes that appeared to be open was not uncommon, just as the practice of hanging those photographs or placing them on a shelf, table, or possibly the piano, where they could be seen and commented on by others, was also considered appropriate. Sometimes photographs were placed in family albums on top of the family Bible, and the polite thing to do, in Black River Falls, and countless other towns and cities, was to show the album to company. Polite company would then comment on “the sweetness of the baby’s picture and ask which one it was since they knew you’d lost little Robert, Laurence, and Ida.”<sup>18</sup> Death often was the topic of polite conversation in the nineteenth century, according to Jay Ruby. Mourning was a normal, natural, expected part of adult public life, and widowhood was a “lifelong social role for many women.”<sup>19</sup>

“Visual Autobiography: Photograph Albums of Turn-of-the-Century Midwestern Women,” by Marilyn F. Motz, is an excellent study of women’s emerging sense of identity, and the role of photographs and their preservation in supporting that identity. Motz maintains that to create an album of meaningful photographs “requires a sense of confidence that one’s own life is a matter of consequence, that one’s own perceptions are valid, and that one’s observations are, or may be in the future, of interest to others.”<sup>20</sup> In the case of albums for

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<sup>17</sup> Michael Lesy, *Wisconsin Death Trip*, New York: Doubleday, 1973, n.p.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., n.p.

<sup>19</sup> Jay Ruby, *Secure the Shadow*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995, p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> Marilyn F. Motz, “Visual Autobiography: Photograph Albums of Turn-of-the-Century Midwestern Women,” *American Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (March 1989), p. 83.

postmortem photographs there was a blending of lives, the confirmation that the life of the deceased mattered as well as the grief and loss felt by the one compiling the album. Sharing these albums with visitors and receiving their comments was an affirmation of life, loss, and connection. They allowed families to process their grief, continue their healing, and maintain a sense of connectedness to their deceased loved one.

Occasionally, a picture was taken of the deceased lying down with the eyes open, and then it was turned ninety degrees to make it appear that the person was standing up, and alive, when the picture was taken. A variation, seen in pictures of the Old West, was for criminals to be posed standing in their coffins and propped up against a building. These images were largely circulated for their sensational and entertainment value.

It is important to remember that the photographing of the deceased was not unnatural in the Victorian world. Surely, some individuals were uncomfortable at the thought, since no practice is absolutely accepted by everyone, but largely postmortem photography was a natural extension of photography's possibilities. By accessing the technology available, nineteenth-century Americans did not have to give up all vestiges of the deceased loved one. They could still see the likeness, could still have a physical presence of the deceased in the home. James Garfield, who became the twentieth president, hurried home from the Civil War to have his picture taken with his dead infant before the burial.<sup>21</sup>

Whatever difficulty may have existed in watching the photographer pose and manipulate the body of the deceased, in order to achieve the most pleasing and natural of likenesses, it was unlikely to rival the trauma of having witnessed the accident or death, which was much more likely to have occurred at home. We must guard against the presentist

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<sup>21</sup> Margaret M. Coffin, *Death in Early America*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc., 1976, p. 203.

thinking that tells us that this was somehow unnatural or bizarre. The distance we maintain between ourselves and death is as great as that existing between our twenty-first century and the nineteenth. It is not necessary that we understand the practice as much as that we accept it as the socially relevant behavior of a group of people at a given time.

Postmortem photography created a relationship, of sorts, between the photographer and the family of the deceased. For a brief time they interacted during a difficult and personal situation. It is reasonable to consider the motivations of the photographers involved. Why did they provide the service? The answers may be as varied as those who took the photographs. There definitely was a financial factor involved. A Massachusetts photographer advertising to sell his studio in 1854 made the claim that “pictures of deceased persons alone will pay all expenses” in a city of 20,000 people.<sup>22</sup>

Death provided a steady income, and the events we might consider worthy of photographing now—weddings, graduations, sporting activities—were not photographed to the extent that they are now. To maintain a business, and to remain competitive when others were providing the service, caused many photographers to make themselves available for taking postmortem photographs.

Photographers who did not make enough money in individual sittings to maintain their businesses made up the difference in their volume of work. A painted portrait cost from twenty to fifty dollars; the least expensive daguerreotype was twenty-five cents. Most postmortem sittings fell somewhere in between and often resulted in more than one picture being taken, though perhaps only the best was chosen. Records from Southworth & Company of Boston, reflecting 1841 to 1859, show a typical pattern of business to be sixteen

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<sup>22</sup> Deborah A. Smith, “‘The Visage Once So Dear’: Interpreting Memorial Photographs,” *Dublin Seminar For New England FolkLife, Annual Proceedings* 19 (1994), p. 262.

sittings on twelve separate days. The charge for taking pictures of a dead child at home was twelve dollars, with a sixty-three cent charge for hiring a carriage. On 21 February 1846, the records show three sittings on one day.<sup>23</sup> The average cost at this studio ranged from ten to fifteen dollars, preventing the working class from affording their services, but Southworth & Company was considered very expensive. A daguerreotype was available for less than a dollar in most big cities.

Professional photographers shared tips and advice on photographing the dead through trade journals that were published at the time. Josiah Southworth of Southworth and Hawes, previously identified as one of the most expensive and artistically inclined studios in Boston, offered this advice in 1873:

I will say on this point, because it is a very important one, that you may do just as you please so far as the handling and bending of corpses is concerned. You can bend them till the joints are pliable, and make them assume a natural and easy position. If a person has died, and his friends are afraid that there will be liquid ejected from the mouth, you can carefully turn them over just as though they are under the operation of an emetic. You can do that in less than one single minute, and every single thing will pass out, and you can wipe the mouth and wash off the face, and handle them just as well as though they were well persons. Arrange them in this position, or bend them into this position. Then place your camera and take your pictures just as they would look in life, as if standing up before you.<sup>24</sup>

James F. Ryder recalled an experience he had in New York in 1850:

I was regarded with respect and supposed to be a prosperous young fellow. All were friendly and genial—save one. The blacksmith, a heavy, burly man...Said I was a lazy dog, too lazy to do honest work...and swindling the people of their hard earnings...He said he wouldn't allow me to take his dog; that I ought to be ashamed of robbing poor people...Well, I left that quiet town and brawny blacksmith one day and moved to another town a few miles distant. A week later I was surprised at a visit from him...He had a crazed

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<sup>23</sup> Jay Ruby, *Secure the Shadow*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995, p. 165.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

manner...He demanded that I put my machine in his wagon and go with him...Then the powerful man, with heavy chest, burst into a passion of weeping quite uncontrollable. When he subsided sufficiently to speak he grasped my hands, and through heavy weeping, broken out afresh, told me his little boy had been drowned in the mill race and I must go and take his likeness.<sup>25</sup>

Gabriel Harrison, a daguerreotypist, gave a more romantic account of his work:

The sun rose gloomily...bleak north-west wind and fleeting clouds gave token of a wintry approach...Her pale lips, though motionless, spoke despair..."Oh! sir, my child Armenia is dead, and I have no likeness of here, won't you come immediately and take her picture"...Into a deep cellar basement I descended...dying embers in the grate...heavenly rays which entered through the low windows...the mother, on her knees beside the bed leaned over her darling, her only child, with her face buried in her hands..."You are here," she said..."Oh, a thousand, thousand thanks."<sup>26</sup>

It is not surprising that many photographers expressed the hope that they would never again have to photograph a dead body. The grief of devastated families combined with attempting to do their jobs and still prevent families from witnessing any unfortunate incidents with bodies, such as the deceased sliding off of a chair, or the head unexpectedly rolling around, brought many photographers to the point of fatigue and revulsion.<sup>27</sup> They were, after all, human themselves, and constantly confronted with the reality of their own mortality. Even if they could remain distant emotionally from the families involved, their own death would surely have occurred to them frequently.

Photographers also tried other means of generating income related to death. They would sometimes mount a photographic copy of the death announcement from the newspaper and send it, unsolicited, to the family. The photographer asked that the family return the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>27</sup> Stanley B. Burns, *Sleeping Beauty: Memorial Photography in America*, Twelvetreets Press, 1990, n.p.

death announcement if not required, or that they send stamps in payment of a certain amount. It is easy to imagine how difficult it was for families to reject the photographer's token of grief, to send it back as undesired, and wonder what became of it. Undoubtedly, most families kept the death announcements. Whether or not they paid for them is uncertain, but it was a creative marketing ploy.<sup>28</sup>

Photographers also were commissioned to record the monument, memorial stone, or grave itself. Having a photograph of an impressive monument in the family album signified wealth and prestige. These photographs often were sent to distant relatives and friends, and they provided confirmation of the death as well as an opportunity for closure. Photographing a monument could provide technical challenges, such as the over-exposure possible with glaring white marble. Also, attempts were made to avoid showing surrounding stones to suggest the grave was at a distinct and select site.<sup>29</sup>

While thousands of postmortem photographs from the nineteenth century still survive today, it is reasonable to assume that many times more were destroyed. The changing attitudes toward death in American culture as the twentieth century approached surely led many families to destroy postmortem photographs.<sup>30</sup> The glorification of death was no longer popular or desired. Consequently, we cannot make determinations about the number of postmortem photographs made from the numbers that survive. We do know the practice of having photographs of the dead made was primarily a middle and working class activity. It occurred in both urban and rural areas. No data was found indicating the participation of

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<sup>28</sup> Audrey Linkman, *The Victorians: Photographic Portraits*, New York: Tauris Parke Books, 1993, p. 119.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.



ethnic or religious groups, though the photographing of nuns and priests upon their deaths, for the creation of memorial prayer cards, did occur. From the common farm family to royalty, the postmortem photograph soothed the broken hearts of grieving families. It was rumored that Queen Victoria herself slept below a photograph showing Prince Albert from the shoulders up, taken after his death in 1861.<sup>31</sup>

Nancy West likens the postmortem photograph to a religious relic, and describes the methods of containing and displaying daguerreotypes as a kind of enshrining of them. She explains that, “Like physical remains, the daguerreotype typified vulnerability.” Since they were small, fragile, and sensitive to light, daguerreotypes often had honored places in “small, jewel-like boxes of Moroccan leather embossed with designs ranging from conventional medallions to vases of flowers, to musical instruments.” Cases were padded with velvet and decorated with gold. The opening and closing of the case replicated the solemn ritual of opening a saint’s reliquary, a touch of the miraculous.<sup>32</sup> While this description may seem melodramatic, it is not possible to over estimate the profound significance of the postmortem photograph to Victorians.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>32</sup> Nancy Martha West, *Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia*, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000, p. 147.

## CHAPTER 7. THE CHANGING TIMES

As the nineteenth century drew to a close new developments changed the ways Americans dealt with death, including the role they gave to photography. In 1863, during the Civil War, Dr. Thomas H. Holmes discovered a safe embalming fluid. He and his associates embalmed thousands of soldiers and shipped them home at the rate of \$100 for officers and \$25 for enlisted men.<sup>1</sup> Embalming delayed the decay of the body and made it possible to apply cosmetics to the skin. It also allowed for a longer funerary period, which increased the number of people able to attend the services. When Abraham Lincoln was assassinated in 1865, his body was embalmed. He was the first public figure to be embalmed, thus allowing his body to lie in state longer. This helped to accelerate public awareness and acceptance of the procedure.

Embalming helped close the door on the longheld fear many had of being buried alive. However, it was a funerary practice that involved special skills and equipment. The technical aspects, as well as increased demand for the service, pushed the care and preparation of the dead into the hands of professional “funeral directors” as opposed to the more gothic sounding “undertaker.” Once that happened, “coffins” were more commonly called “caskets,” and the formerly plain wooden box became more ornate. These changes resulted in a privatization of the handling of the body, and began distancing people from the death experience, as they had previously known it. As professional funeral parlors became more abundant and accessible, bodies were sent there by families for preparation, and photographers were less likely to be called.

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley B. Burns, *Sleeping Beauty: Memorial Photography in America*, Twelvetreets Press, 1990, n.p.

Once the body was at the funeral parlor the photographer generally lost the ability to handle and pose it, and even the opportunity to photograph the deceased person grew limited. By the 1880s, photographs were still taken, but the “sleep” image was less frequent because it had become more common to display the body in the casket, thereby preventing a credible suggestion of sleep. Elaborate floral arrangements on, and in front of, the casket literally created physical distance between the deceased and the grieving, further altering the mourners’ experience of death.<sup>2</sup>

Death was still a strong presence in the last twenty years of the nineteenth century, but the death rate had declined to nineteen per thousand. Clothes, pins, ribbons, and other decorations related to death were still very common, and social organizations, such as the Masons and the Knights of Pythias, became involved in the funeral services of members. The depiction of death, its presentation, grew more “beautified” and less stark, not just in the addition of floral tributes but also in the caskets used. Some opened to resemble satin-lined couches, and others were designed in the “jewel box” style with a side opening.<sup>3</sup> All of this became possible as people dealt with fewer deaths in their personal experience, as insurance money made more costly funerals possible, and as death became more of a business.

In 1898, the American Association of Cemetery Superintendents published an address entitled, “An Address on Sunday Funerals,” dictating that they be banned. Their reasoning was that a Sunday funeral became a public event as people off from work and already out for church would be more likely to attend. Their goal was to privatize the funeral and to maintain it as a dignified situation. By 1910, approximately half of the cemeteries had banned Sunday

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<sup>2</sup> Jay Ruby, *Secure the Shadow*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995, pp. 74-76.

<sup>3</sup> Stanley B. Burns, *Sleeping Beauty: Memorial Photography in America*, Twelvetreets Press, 1990, n.p.

funerals. In 1899, an article entitled, “The Dying of Death,” appeared in *Review of Reviews*, and argued that “the fear of death is being replaced by the joy of life.”<sup>4</sup>

Funerals themselves took on a more social atmosphere. The embalmed body allowed a longer mourning period, allowing friends and family to travel from farther away to attend the funeral. Photographers began taking pictures of large groups of mourners, sometimes clustered around the deceased person in an open casket. Families wanted to commemorate these gatherings.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, many people possessed their own cameras by the end of the nineteenth century, and the services of a professional photographer were not required. After the 1880s, trade journals rarely carried articles about photographing the dead, and photographers no longer advertised the service. It may have been that people knew from experience that the service was available, or it may have been that photographers no longer sought the association with postmortem photography. Attitudes were changing.

The temptation is to think of postmortem photography as a nineteenth-century phenomenon because the photographs we see are usually black and white and from before World War I. The reality is that postmortem photography has never stopped, though professionals are generally not employed. As the twentieth century began the service was no longer advertised, and other events and occasions provided photographers with ample work. People’s focus moved from death to life as improvements in medicine and technology provided a more reasonable expectation of children living beyond the age of two. That optimism, combined with less of a need to deal directly with death, caused the cultural atmosphere to change from being steeped in death images to embracing life in a new century.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., n.p.

<sup>5</sup> Jay Ruby, *Secure the Shadow*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995, n.p.

Death as the subject of photography still appeared in various sources. Dorothea Mitchell, writing in her memoirs, *Lady Lumberjack*, tells of an experience in the early twentieth century. She was approached by a mother whose four-year-old daughter had died, because the mother knew that Mitchell was, among other things, a photographer. Mitchell was concerned that she had no flash bulb and that the lighting would be insufficient but, standing on a stepladder near the light fixture, she was able to get a good picture. According to Mitchell, “To me, the whole idea seemed rather weird. But the mother was so happy about it, I had an enlargement made and very faintly tinted, which made the sweet little thing appear to be merely sleeping. It was hung in an honoured place in their living room!”<sup>6</sup>

In 1932, the Kodak Company was working on “The Death Campaign.” Prior to this time Kodak had focused on amateur photography only as a happy, fun activity, a way to capture life’s brightest times. However, Nancy West found the unfinished and unused advertisements and related materials in the Kodak archives. She speculates that because this campaign “violated the very foundation on which Kodak advertising had been based” it was deemed unacceptable, and aborted sometime in 1932. The apparent intention was to encourage people to take photographs when someone died to help ward off death and sorrow. West speculates that one reason for the timing was that in 1932 the country was deep into the Great Depression, and something as potentially frivolous in nature as taking pictures could be justified as important if it dealt with death. Another possible explanation is that the company intended to acknowledge George Eastman’s death in March of 1932. Ultimately, death as something that could be successfully marketed to the amateur photographer was abandoned.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Dorothea Mitchell, *Lady Lumberjack*, Vancouver: Mitchell Press Ltd., 1967, pp. 87-88.

<sup>7</sup> Nancy Martha West, *Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia*, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000, pp. 200-206.

People have resorted to taking their own postmortem photographs, however. Funeral directors noted that they found flash bulbs in waste baskets when flash photography was first developed. Photo labs in Pennsylvania, as recently as 1995, reported that approximately a dozen of every thousand photographs processed are funeral-related.<sup>8</sup>

Postmortem photography is part of our culture now in ways that we may not recognize. Medical and mental health professionals recommend the photographing of all stillbirths and infant deaths at medical facilities so that parents will have a tangible representation of their lost child. If they reject the photograph at first, it is placed in the family's file where it is usually claimed later. Some health professionals believe that sonograms provide some comfort and memories for women who miscarry babies because the images affirm the existence, however brief, of the expected child.<sup>9</sup> Marianne Hirsch points out, in *The Familial Gaze*, that "post-mortems have migrated from the walls of the family parlor and the pages of photo albums to the front pages of newspapers and mass-circulation magazines." She believes the images, presented in this form, have lost "their specificity and their original function as private memorials to the dead, becoming, in the process, 'family pictures' of a different kind."<sup>10</sup>

Postmortem photography in the nineteenth century was an affirmation that the person was real, the loss was real, and the grief was real. Unlike now, that one cherished image of a loved one resting in peace may have been the only tangible remembrance that a mourning friend or family member had of the person who had died. Perhaps we understand the connection more than we realize. We have been photographed and will be in the future. The

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<sup>8</sup> Jay Ruby, *Secure the Shadow*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995, p. 163.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 180-182.

<sup>10</sup> Marianne Hirsch, ed. *The Familial Gaze*, Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999, p. 156.

unknown factor is whether we will always get to choose when we are the subject of a photograph, or if life—or perhaps death—will decide that for us.

## CHAPTER 8. CONCLUSION

The nineteenth century was a time of progress and innovation. Travel and communication methods improved and widened the world for Victorians, but no technology so personally touched their lives as photography. Every aspect of their daily lives was subject matter for the camera, and death was a significant part of their lives. Shorter life expectancies, accidents, and disease made death a much more constant presence than most of us can imagine now. Victorians took advantage of the new technology of photography to capture and preserve images precious to them, including those of the dead. This intersection of technology and attitudes, the photographic possibilities and the presence of death and mourning as part of the prevailing culture, resulted in the practice of postmortem photography. It is a compelling paradox—that photography was a natural, accepted process to most Victorians, an expression of their lives and lifestyles, and yet a most desperate act when employed to preserve images of the deceased. The gap between life and death was bridged by the camera, resulting in a photographic image that helped in the grieving process while maintaining a sense of connection.

Preserving images of the deceased had long been an activity of the wealthy, who could afford to commission portrait artists to paint family members before or after death. Only when photography became available did the middle and working class have the opportunity to preserve the likenesses of their deceased loved ones. As with other technologies, there was a democratizing effect, an extending and expanding of opportunities to the less affluent that made the photograph a common element to all levels of society.

Victorian Americans, while restrained in their public display of emotions, lived in a time of heightened romance in dramatic literature and stage productions, consolation



literature and women's magazines, with the Civil War and its aftermath, and with new and seemingly miraculous technologies. Quickly embraced, photography flourished as people captured their lives in photographic images. Because death was such a constant and natural part of their lives, postmortem photography was a reasonable and acceptable practice to many in the mid to late nineteenth century.

Daguerreotypes were the first photographic images available when the process was perfected in 1839, and millions of images were taken. The biggest limitation of daguerreotypes was that they were not reproducible. The wet collodion process, developed shortly thereafter, was faster, required less time for the exposure, and allowed for many images to be produced from a negative. Innovations constantly improved the process of photography, and men from many different fields and professions turned to photography as a way to find what they hoped would be fame and fortune.

As discussed, photographs are the best and worst of primary sources. Each picture seems to contain a story, but without identifying details recorded on the photograph, as is usually the case, the photograph greedily holds its story to itself and leaves us to wonder and speculate as to the circumstances of the person and the taking of the photograph. This is particularly true in the case of postmortem photographs.

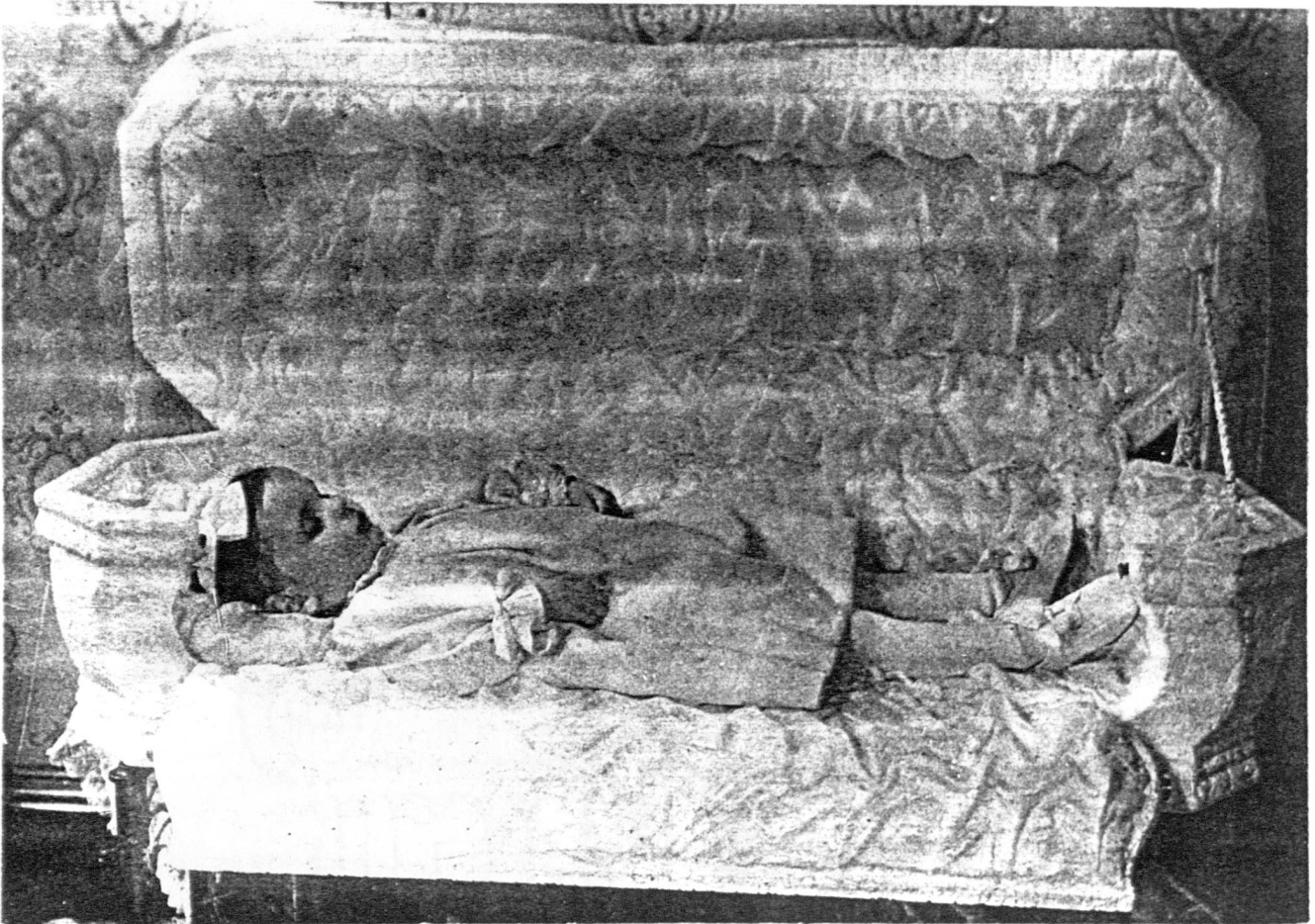
Postmortem photography was a means of preserving and maintaining a record and a sense of connectedness to the deceased. Many people did not already have photographs of a loved one when they died, and in desperation turned to the photograph as a way of capturing a likeness before it was too late. Others wanted a peaceful image of tribute and affection, and found the photograph a means of expressing and displaying their devotion to the deceased.

Because they were not distanced from death as part of the life process, as we are now, the extension of photography to include the deceased was a natural and accepted practice.

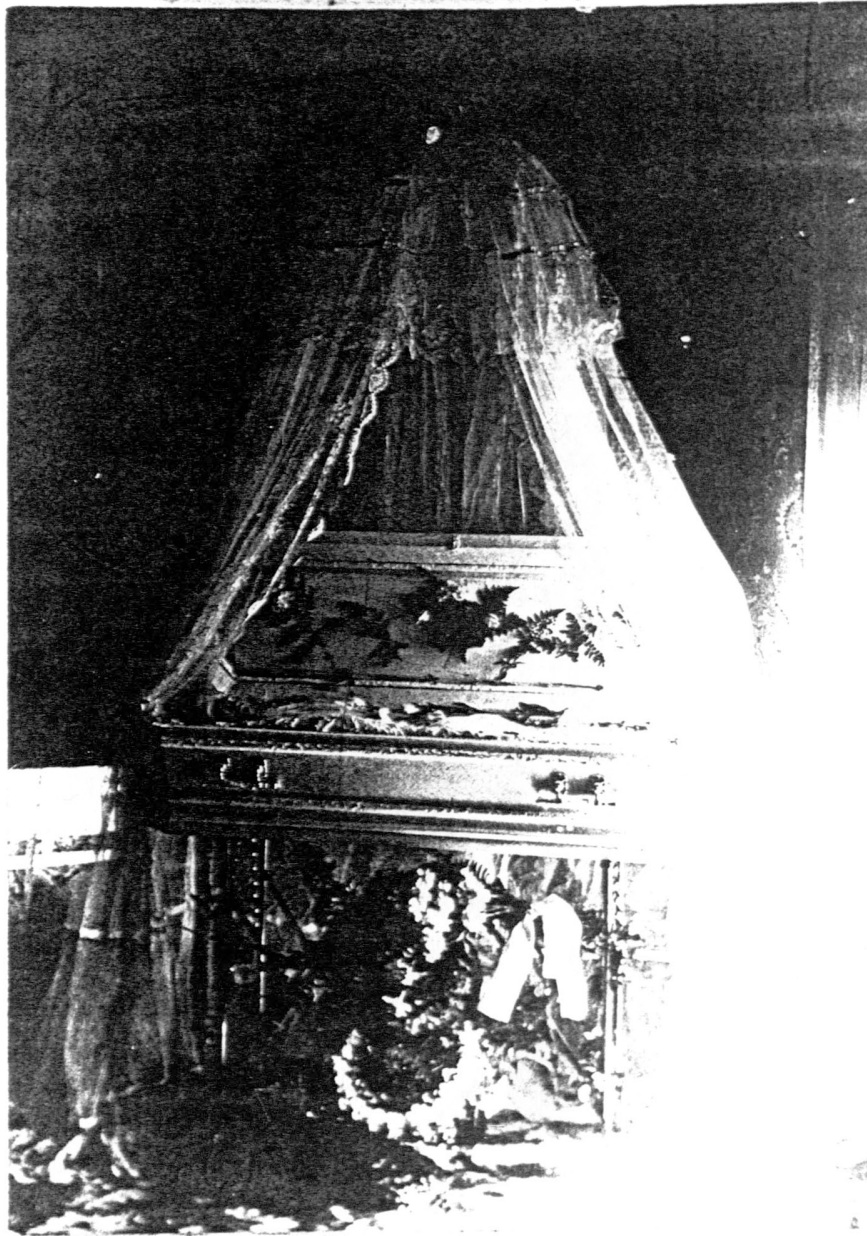
As attitudes toward life and death changed so did the practice of postmortem photography. With technical innovations in medicine, travel, communications, and services people became more hopeful and optimistic about the future. No longer did the preoccupation with death seem necessary or desired. Families began to experience fewer deaths as children survived infancy, and the average life expectancy increased. The growing funeral industry took over many of the functions, such as the preparation of the body, that family members had attended to in the past. People became more distanced from death, and postmortem photography became less common. Amateur photography also became more of an option, as people purchased their own cameras, and many people took their own postmortem photographs instead of hiring a professional.

Postmortem photography represents a most compelling intersection of human need and technological innovation. At the time when Victorians were most fully engrossed in experiencing the dramatic and romantic elements of emotion, and doing that within a climate of ever-present death, photography was perfected and became part of the common person's experience. As easily as it was accepted as a means of celebrating life, photography became a way of confronting, and slightly defying, death's finality. This paradox—the commonplace and accepted also becoming an extreme act of desperation—captures postmortem photography as a disturbing yet amazing example of people accessing technology to change their lives.

## APPENDIX: PHOTOGRAPHS



**Figure 1.** From the collection of Loren N. Horton. Used by permission. This child is identified as Carrie A. Cullum, born 8 March 1906, and died 13 December 1907. She is buried in the Bonaparte Cemetery in Van Buren County, Iowa. It is typical to dress children in all white for burial, signifying their purity and innocence. It is unclear if this picture was taken at home or at the funeral parlor. The elaborate quilted casket reflects the beautification of death in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.



**Figure 2.** From the collection of Loren N. Horton. Used by permission.

This unidentified child is surrounded by sheer, lace-covered drapery, giving the casket the suggestion of heavenly light and the soul's ascension. Inside the lid, "floating flowers" offer the idea of the child surrounded by the beautiful and the spiritual. This photograph appears to have been taken at home, with one window darkened and the other with the curtain open to bathe the casket in light, and possibly to facilitate the taking of the photograph.



**Figure 3.** From the collection of Loren N. Horton. Used by permission.

This unidentified child is captured as nearly sleeping. The eyes are partly opened, the lips slightly parted, as if just drifting off to sleep. The folded hands indicate otherwise. The cover over the child is not smoothed but somewhat folded, as a child might move the blankets. Yet the baby is nestled into roses, another indication that it is not sleeping. The depth of the photograph suggests the child is in a casket, not on a bed.

LEWITZ  
1843 N. ROBEY ST.  
NEAR SCHOOL ST.  
CHICAGO, ILL.



**Figure 4.** From the collection of Loren N. Horton. Used by permission.

This little girl is identified only as "Elsie," spelled out in the flowers above her head. Posed within her casket, there is no attempt to suggest she is merely sleeping. She is holding two items in her folded hands. In her right she appears to be holding flowers or greenery, symbols of life. In her left hand is a doll with a porcelain face and full outfit. The inclusion of personal items is not common. Elsie likewise is fully dressed with lacy pantaloons and shoes showing. This photograph appears to have been taken at home.



**Figure 5.** From the collection of Loren N. Horton. Used by permission. This unidentified child is posed as if having fallen asleep in the chair. The right arm is leaning, bent at the elbow, on the arm of the chair. Yet it is apparent she is dead, the roses appearing to have fallen from her hand into her lap. She is dressed in all white, typical of burial dress for children.





**Figure 6.** From the collection of Loren N. Horton. Used by permission.

This photograph of an unidentified little boy was probably taken about 1905. He may be at home or at the funeral parlor. The floral arrangements in front of the casket illustrate the distance created between the grieving and the deceased.





**Figure 7.** From the collection of Loren N. Horton. Used by permission. It is difficult to determine the age of this unidentified young woman. She is photographed as if having fallen asleep sitting up. She is wearing a pin and flowers at her neck, a ring on her left index finger, and appears to hold a handkerchief. She was probably photographed at home or at the photographer's studio.

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